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CHAPTER 1.

The Proof of a Theory—Olga's Story—A Thief—The Mysterious Badge—Retribution!

SEXTON BLAKE and his friend, the Hon. John Lawless, were playing a game of billiards in a quiet saloon nearby the former's house in Baker Street. Tinker, Blake's young assistant, had taken upon himself the onerous duties of marker, and the game had reached the interesting stage of 240 all—a fact which Tinker, in a voice which would not have shamed a professional marker at one of the great billiard tournaments, had announced.

Lawless turned and smiled across at Tinker.

The tall adventurer was, perhaps, the better player of the two, for, as he explained himself, his skull suggested a misspent youth!

There were times when Lawless would rattle off his fifty or sixty breaks, and yet it was only once in a blue moon, as he termed it, that he was able to beat Blake.

Here again his old fate overcame him. It was Blake's turn to play, and, after negotiating a very fine in-off the red, the balls were placed at the top of the table in an ideal position, and a couple of cannons, followed by the potting of the red, brought the match to an end.

"That's the stuff to give 'em, guv'nor!" Tinker said, grinning across at the tall, shirt-sleeved figure of Lawless.

Lawless placed his cue against the table and looked across at Blake with a smile on his strong, handsome face.

"I knew it, old chap!" he said. "There are one or two individuals in this world that I don't seem able to beat at anything, and you're in that class when it comes to billiards—and, indeed, most other things!"

"I didn't think there were many people in the world who could give you a beating, Lawless," Tinker observed.

"But there are, old chap," Lawless said. "For instance, there's my uncle, Lord Waventree! When he gets talking about finance, I'm under the table; and then there's—well, there's my mother. I've never been able to convince her yet that my life isn't one long series of ghastly and awesome escapes from death."

Tinker shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not so sure that your mother is far wrong," he observed. "You are a bit like me in that respect, Lawless. If there's anything going to happen within a hundred miles of where we are, it's a case of ten to one that we'll walk right into it."

Blake was sipping a cup of coffee, and he looked across at the others now.

"It's just Fate, Tinker," Lawless said.

"You are quite mistaken, old chap," Blake returned. "I'll admit that perhaps there is a guiding influence that leads fellows like you into trouble, but that is because you are inspired to interfere!"

"Not a bit of it. I've grown wiser during the past few years," said Lawless. "I've taken jolly good care I didn't interfere in anything, but, hang it, it all drops on me just the same. For instance, you take that case of the old South American millionaire in the Scotch express. Was it my fault that he chose my compartment, then went off into a dead faint, and I had to nurse him till we reached Crewe? Yet you know what happened, when we helped him out of the train, and the doctor came and brought him round. The first thing he did, after searching his pockets, was to accuse me of pinching that packet of diamonds he had stowed away in his pocket,

and it took you and Tinker all your time to trace the real thief!"

Lawless was alluding to a minor accident that had occurred some four of five months ago, in which he had been involved.

Blake nodded his head.

"You were to blame," he pointed out. "That is to say, your method of handling things was to blame. It is quite true that Mr. Van Dyal came into your compartment, but when he fainted it was perfectly easy for you to go in search of the guard. A more nervous type of passenger would certainly have done so, but you tackled the poor fellow yourself, and didn't think of calling for assistance until the train reached Crewe; those twenty minutes that you passed with Van Dyal naturally dragged you into the affair."

"Oh, I see what you're driving at," Lawless commented. "You mean as soon as anything happens in my vicinity I ought to bolt for help?"

Tinker chuckled.

"That's about it, old chap. Get right away from it!"

Blake nodded his head.

"I don't say you are ever able to do that, Lawless," he observed, "but you see what I mean. The average citizen, as soon as he sees anything unusual happening, sends for the police. The result is that he's never dragged into these affairs. It's my contention that most men during their lives have the opportunity of taking part in many queer dramas and events, but because of their caution, their twentieth-century training, they avoid trouble."

"Oh, I get you," said Lawless. You mean if the average Londoner were to walk down the street and see a man knocked on the head he would shout for the police, instead of following the fellow who did it."

"I don't go so far as that," Blake returned. "Nine out of ten men would certainly make an effort to stop the attacker. I am referring to the more subtle kind of crime, the undiscovered tragedies and murders that have recently taken place in this country."

He mentioned a certain drama, and then went on:

"It is certainly impossible for that man not to have been observed by someone, yet the police themselves are baffled, and there's a big possibility that the fellow will never be brought to justice. Four hundred years ago that crime could never have been committed, for then every man had to guard himself, and the slightest suspicious movement on the part of a stranger made a man watchful. Now, to-day, we all are so used to being protected by the police that a suspicious character may rub shoulders with us, and we never dream of taking any particular notice."

"You are quite right, Blake," Lawless agreed. "I have never studied it out before, but no doubt it is my confounded curiosity that gets me into the various scrapes!"

He carried his cue across and replaced it in the rack.

"No more billiards," he said. "I think I'll be toddling along home now. It's getting late."

A few moments later they all left the billiard-room, extinguishing the lights as they went.

As Tinker emerged into the passage he heard the distant clamour of a bell: a quick, clear, beating sound that every Londoner knows only too well.

Tinker hurried to the window at the end of the landing and flung it wide.

"A fire, guv'nor. Listen!"

Nearer and nearer drew the clamour, and they heard the roar of the motor engine.

There are very few people who can sit quietly in their chairs while a fire-engine is passing by, and neither Lawless nor Tinker were in that category. They reached the window just as the huge fire-escape dashed down the wide street.

Tinker gripped Lawless by the arm and pointed.

"Look! Just above the roofs! There! By jingo, it's a fire in Baker Street!"

Blake reached his assistant's side and looked over the broad shoulders of Lawless. Against the black sky was a red glare—a glare that rapidly increased.

"It must be the Winchley Hotel," Blake said. "That new place which opened only a few weeks ago!"

Tinker swung round from the window.

"I'm going to have a look!"

Lawless reached out a long arm and gripped him by the shoulder.

"Steady on, Tinker! Don't forget the lecture we've had. Don't go pushing your nose into business that doesn't concern you!"

"Oh, hang it, I can't stay here with a fire going on!" Tinker protested. "Besides, this is quite a different affair. We'll simply play the part of spectators this time. Come along, Lawless!"

Lawless looked at Blake, and the latter nodded.

"We might as well go and see what's happening," the detective said.

"Right you are, but don't forget it's on your own head this time," the tall man observed, as he followed the others down the stairs.

When they reached the street they found that it was already well filled by little groups of people hurrying along the pavements.

Fire-engine after fire-engine came whirling along the wide thoroughfare, and some hundred yards from Blake's house a cordon of police had already been drawn across the corner.

Blake's conjecture had been correct, and on the left side of the street, in the centre of a block of older buildings, the six-storeyed, white-fronted Winchley Hotel was the scene of the fire.

It was the top part of the premises that was in flames, and from the wide doorway a stream of guests were pouring.

The firemen had already got to work and, even as Blake and Lawless arrived, one of the huge fire-escapes threw its long arm into the darkness, and a couple of brawny firemen, their helmets glinting in the subdued light, clambered

aloft. Then, with a hiss and a sputter, the first of the great hoses set to work—an incident that was hailed by a cheer from the rapidly gathering multitude.

"Good job for them that it happened before twelve o'clock," Lawless said, with a glance at his wrist watch. "Most of the people, no doubt, will have got clear."

They were close to the cordon of police and, presently, a sergeant, turning to murmur an admonition to the pressing crowd, caught sight of Blake and, touching his helmet, made a space in the line.

"This way, Mr. Blake," he said. "You can come through."

And so it came about that, with no particular effort on their part, Blake, Lawless, and Tinker found themselves inside the cordon, standing on the edge of the kerb.

A knot of people, emerging from the hotel, turned in their direction, and Lawless saw that in the centre of the group were two wet, dishevelled figures, that of a youth of about Tinker's age, and a slim, black-haired girl.

The two were wrapped in blankets, and it was obvious from their manner, and the way that the others supported them, that they were victims of the fire.

The group halted close to Lawless, and a distracted-looking gentleman, who was leading the party, turned and flung up his hands.

"If I could only understand what they are saying," he said with a shake of his head. "Isn't there anyone here who can speak their lingo?"

Tinker was standing a little way behind Blake, and the lad saw Lawless take a pace forward. With a stealthy movement Tinker reached out and caught his guv'nor by the hand.

"There he goes, barging into it again!"

Lawless caught that whisper and came to a halt, but as he did so, a clear, very sweet voice broke out into a little torrent of words.

It came from the blanketed figure of the girl, and there was terror as well as speculation in it.

"The box . . . . the green box, Dimitri. Tell them about it. If it is destroyed, we—we are ruined!"

She spoke in Russian—the clean-sounding, high-pitched Russian of the aristocrat, not the deep, guttural patois of the lower orders of that vast country.

"It is impossible, Olga," the youngster by her side returned. "They do not understand us!"

"Oh, but they must understand—you must make them understand!"

There was no mistaking the distress in the girl's face. It was a very lovely one, with large black eyes, which were luminous now in the half light; the perfect oval and red lips, and the keen distress were more than Lawless could stand, and so, despite the signalled whisper which had passed between Blake and Tinker, he projected himself into the group.

"What is it, miss?" he said. "What can I do for you?"

He spoke in Russian, and the blanket-garbed figure turned to him at once.

"Oh, monsieur, sir, so you speak our tongue? I am so glad, so grateful. Will you please tell the manager there, that in my room, number 460, is a box, a green box, that I want—I must have?"

In her anxiety the girl had slipped out a small hand and caught Lawless by the arm, clinging to him, looking up into his face.

"All right, miss, I will explain."

Lawless turned to the dapper little man.

"This young lady wants a green box that was left in her room," he said in English. "Is there any chance of it being saved?"

The manager shook his head.

"I'll take a note of it, sir," he said. "But as the whole of that floor is on fire I doubt if there's very much chance of anything being saved on it. Still, I'll send word to the firemen."

"What does he say? What does he say?"

The girl's distress was so keen that Lawless temporised.

"He's going to do his best for you, miss," he said. "But, of course, he cannot make a definite promise, you know."

The girl shivered, and Lawless noted that her arm to the elbow was bare. The folds of the blanket slipped back, and he saw the edge of a silken dressing-gown, then, as she took a pace towards him, he noted that her small, bare feet were thrust in tiny slippers.

"But you mustn't stand there, miss," he said. "You will catch cold."

"Oh, no, I must not leave—I must not leave, I must have that green box."

It was a warm night in June, and there was not much fear of the girl catching cold, yet Lawless knew that it would only be a waste of time for her to wait there.

The fire-engines were still arriving, and by this time there were a round dozen of them.

Presently, a spray of water from the building swept the corner of the pavement and scattered the group. Lawless turned to the youth.

"You must persuade the young lady to come away," he said. "In any case, the police will remove us in a moment. There's no good waiting here to get drenched through."

The aristocrat glanced across to where Blake and Tinker were standing, and a quick grin crossed his face.

"My friend here will give you shelter," he said. "Come along."

And so a moment later Lawless presented himself to Blake and Tinker.

"Here you are, old chap," he said, a quiet smile on his face. "This is where you make your choice. Here are two wet, unfortunate creatures, who, apparently, own only the clothes they stand up in now. Are you going to give 'em shelter, or are you going to let them walk the streets until the police decide it's time for them to be lodged in the police-station?"

Tinker's face twisted into a grin of sheer delight.

"Good for you, Lawless," he said under his breath.

Blake turned towards his friend and nodded.

"You have got me all right. Come along!"

He had heard most of the conversation, and he turned to the slim, girlish figure in the blanket.

"I can offer you shelter," he said in Russian. "Our residence is not very far away, and you might as well wait there. The fire will soon be got under now, and we can make inquiries for that green box of yours later."

Two or three policemen, headed by a superintendent were making for the corner now, and the group melted.

"All right, Mr. Barnes," Blake said, with a nod to the superintendent. "I am going to look after these two for a little while, and take them to my place."

"Very kind of you, Mr. Blake," the superintendent said. "Just find out their names, will you?"

"What is your name, mademoiselle?" he asked.

"My name is Azmerieff, Olga Azmerieff, and this is my brother, Dimitri."

She looked at Blake.

"You will tell the police about—about my green box?" she said. "It is so important, so—so vital to me!"

Blake nodded, then turned again to the superintendent.

"There's a green box that this young lady is very anxious about," he declared. "It is in her room, number four hundred and sixty. If you hear of it being found by any of the firemen, you might let me know."

"Certainly, Mr. Blake.

And so it came about that, guided by the policemen, a way was made through the dense throng, and Blake and Lawless led the two unfortunate victims of the fire through the crowd, then on up Baker Street, for the short distance that lay between the detective's home and the site of the fire.

Ten minutes later, Mrs. Bardell, grumbling loudly, had been wakened out of what she termed her beauty sleep, and was preparing a hasty supper; and later on she came into the dining-room with a well-laden tray.

The sight of the unfortunate girl and her brother removed all traces of Mrs. Bardell's ire. She placed the tray on the table and looked across at Mr. Blake.

"Pore thing—pore thing! My goodness! 'Ow dreadful! They might 've been burned-up."

"That's quite true, Mrs. Bardell," Sexton Blake agreed.

Mrs. Bardell nodded across to the blanket-clad figure.

"Maybe she'd like some more clothes, sir. I got a few things that might fit the lady. Tell her she's welcome to 'em."

Blake turned to the girl, who looked from him to the woman, then back again."

"My housekeeper has some clothes that she would be very glad to let you have, Mademoiselle Olga," he said.

The girl rose swiftly and crossed to the old woman. Mrs. Bardell put a motherly arm round the slim shoulders, and they vanished together through the doorway.

"What about Dimitri?" Tinker asked. "I dare say some of my togs would fit him."

Dimitri was in his pyjamas, and at the offer he arose to his feet at once, sending a quick grin across to Tinker

He was a dark haired young fellow of that slim, handsome type that used to be seen in Petrograd in the dandified uniform of the Imperial Guard.

Lawless and Blake laid out the supper, and by the time they had finished, Dimitri came back in one of Tinker's suits, which fitted him well enough.

"It is ver' good of you, gentlemen," he said, in broken English. "I thank you deeply."

A moment later Olga came into the room, flushing slightly as she halted in the light.

Mrs. Bardell evidently possessed a somewhat assorted wardrobe, for the elaborate evening-gown that the elderly lady had given to the girl had been built for a lady of somewhat massive proportions.

And yet, incongruous though the garment was, it only seemed to add to the loveliness of the dark-haired, slender Olga.

Dimitri laughed as he eyed his sister.

"It is long since you dared to wear evening-dress, Olga," he said. "I wonder what the Soviet would say if they saw you now!"

The chairs were brought up to the table, and the coffee was poured out, then, when the two unfortunate guests had made a meal, Blake and Lawless began to chat to them.

"We are from Moscow," Olga explained, "but originally we belonged to Tomsk."

"In Siberia?"

"Yes, monsieur; my brother used to be at the university there."

The girl sighed, twisting her slender fingers for a moment

It was obvious that they were both of the aristocratic class; that class which now had almost ceased to exist in turbulent Russia.

"I have been in Tomsk," Blake said, and at that confession the two turned to him eagerly.

"You know Tomsk? Ah! But you knew it in the old days! Our house was on the hill. We own—at least, we did own—mines. Then my father was very wealthy; but that is all gone. It is some time since you were there, monsieur?"

"Yes; many years ago. I was there when the first tea caravan arrived there that year."

"Ah! The caravan! We made holiday the first day they came; but those old days will never return again, monsieur."

Tears welled into the black eyes of the girl, and Blake made haste to change the subject.

"What brings you to England from Moscow?" he asked.

The brother and sister exchanged glances.

"We—we had business," Olga said. "We were very poor in Moscow. My brother was working in a restaurant—a waiter—and I—I was in a laundry."

She held out her small hands, and Blake and Lawless noted how the fingers and palms were rough and broken.

"They are not well yet," Olga said, with a sigh. "Life is very hard in Moscow now, for we—we who were once aristocrats, monsieur."

"I can quite believe that," Blake returned drily.

A little silence ensued, then Lawless, in his usual impetuous way, entered the breach.

"We don't want to be inquisitive, mademoiselle," he said, "but I think I ought to tell you that the gentleman who is your host is an English detective. His name is Sexton Blake, and he has a world-wide reputation."

"A detective—eh?"

"Yes; there must be many people in Russia who know him, and if you are in need of a friend, I am sure he will help you."

Under the table, Tinker reached out a long leg and kicked Lawless on the shin, but the tall man paid no attention to that slight interruption.

"If your business is of a private nature, and you want help, I should apply to my friend here," he said.

Olga turned her large eyes on Blake.

"We do need help," she said, "but we were afraid. We only arrived in London yesterday, and we—we thought we had come here unobserved, but to-night has proved that we were mistaken."

"What do you mean, mademoiselle?"

Olga turned and nodded to Dimitri.

"My brother recognised somebody in the dining-room this evening," she said. "We—we didn't know he was here in England, for we saw him last in Moscow. Even then we were not sure he was following us, but to-night's experience proves that we were betrayed by someone."

"Do you mean to say that the fire was—was—was——"

"The fire was intended to destroy us," Dimitri said, in a solemn, hushed voice.

"I can't believe that. It seems incredible."

The young fellow in Tinker's clothes leaned forward.

"My sister occupied room 460, and I was in 461, on the other side of the passage. Our two rooms were at the end of the corridor, and there was a bath-room next to mine. We were tired, and went to bed early. I could not sleep, although I must have dozed off. I awakened to find my room full of smoke, and I found that someone had locked my door, and had attached a rope to it, that was also tied to my sister's door."

"You are sure of this?"

"I am quite sure, monsieur. I tried to open the door, and could not; then I went back to the window, and flung it open. A ledge from my window ran to the window of the bathroom, and it was thus I got out from my own bedroom into the bathroom, so into the passage. There I found the rope, and I could hear my sister beating on her door. I unfastened the rope and opened it."

He clenched his fist convulsively.

"The passage was filled with smoke, and I lifted my sister and ran with her on to the landing. I shouted, and one of the servants of the hotel appeared. That was the first they had learnt about the fire, monsieur, for we happened to be the only two who had retired to bed so early. I was taking my sister downstairs, when she remembered the box, and we tried to get back again; but by this time other people had come to the floor, and, though we tried to get through them, the fire had spread along to the other rooms. It would have been madness for us to attempt it."

"And you, mademoiselle? How did you discover the fire?"

"It was in the room next to mine that the fire broke out," Olga said. "The room communicated with mine by a door. There was a wardrobe against the door, and I didn't trouble to examine it. I was asleep, and wakened to find my room full of smoke. I jumped out of bed, and turned on the electric light. I saw then that the wardrobe had been forced aside, and the inner door opened. I could see the flames and the smoke pouring through it. I got to my own door and began to beat on it, but it was a long time before Dimitri opened it, and I was half dead with fright then."

"And you observed nothing else?"

The girl hesitated, exchanging glances with her brother. Dimitri nodded.

"This gentleman is a detective, Olga," he said. "Perhaps it would be advisable to tell him what you saw. He may help us."

Olga leaned forward.

"When I looked at the inner door, monsieur, I saw, above the smoke, a face—the face of a man that I knew—and feared!"

"You mean there was a man in the room next to you?"

"Yes, monsieur. I only had a glimpse of him, but he was looking into my room."

"Who was he?"

"His name is Doubroff," Olga said. "He is my cousin, and is also my enemy. I know what he was there for, monsieur. He wanted the green box, and I—I am afraid he has got it! Three days before we left Moscow he sent for me—he was staying at the Slavinsky Bazaar—and he warned me then."

Her face changed, and over it there came that sweet but sad expression which is characteristic of the Russian women.

"He threatened me then, monsieur," she added. "But I didn't think he knew so much about us. I am sure now that he must have followed us and waited until I had got the green box here in London."

"You mean that the green box was here, waiting for you?"

"It was in the bank, monsieur—a safe deposit. It had been left there many years, and my brother and I had received a receipt for it."

"What did it contain?" Blake asked.

"Papers belonging to my father," Olga said. "Many, many years ago, when Dimitri and I were tiny children, my father bought land in America. He did so on the advice of his brother, who had gone to America years before to settle down. My father often spoke to us about this

land, for it was somewhere in Texas, and he always told us that the day would come when we would find it worth while to go to America. My father said there was oil on our property, but the War came, and later, the Revolution, then the Soviet."

She sighed.

"My father died, and our house was taken from us, and we were driven out like vagabonds. We came to Moscow with my mother, but she died six months after, and Dimitri and I were left alone. Through the agency of a friend we heard that some of my father's papers were in Petrograd, in the hands of a lawyer there, and we wrote to the lawyer.

"It was only afterwards that we discovered that Doubroff, the son of my father's brother, through whom the property had been purchased, was in Petrograd trying to find traces of my father. He found out where we were and came to Moscow. He is in league with the Soviet, monsieur; a creature of Lenin's, and has been working for them in America."

She drew a deep breath.

"He wants to get possession of my father's property in Texas," Olga continued. "We couldn't understand at first, but Dimitri overheard a conversation in the restaurant, where he was working, between two men, and discovered the truth. My father's property in America is worth a lot of money, for oil has been found on it, and there are rich combinations who are anxious to buy."

She glanced at Blake.

"Dimitri went at once to Petrograd and had a conversation with our lawyer, with the result that we discovered among my father's papers a receipt for the green box in a London bank. Further search proved that it was in this green box that the title deeds of the American property had been placed by my father. Dimitri got the receipt and came back to Moscow. Then we planned that we should come to London, get the box, and go on to America. Doubroff had called on me several times, but I—I hate him, monsieur, and at our last interview he revealed his true self."

A shudder ran through the slender, girlish figure.

"He told him that he intended to claim the land, and had the Government behind him, too. He said we would have been arrested long ago had it not been for his intervention. He pretended to be—to be in love with me, and he asked me again to be his wife. Next day, Dimitri and I fled from Moscow, and after a terrible journey, reached Warsaw, where we found friends to help us to get passports and money for the journey to London."

There was a silence, then Dimitri turned to Blake.

"I didn't trust Doubroff, monsieur," he said. "Even our escape from Moscow seemed to be too easy, and I know now it was all arranged. Doubroff allowed us to get away, but followed us in order to get hold of our papers. I am convinced, monsieur, that he kept touch with us all the time—saw us go to the bank and get the green box."

He flung out his hand with a helpless gesture.

"To-night's experience proves that Doubroff is ready to murder us to gain his ends, and I think that already he has got the better of us—the green box is now in his possesion."

"We've lost everything—everything," Olga said, with a quick, indrawn breath. "I was afraid that something would happen to us, but this is worse than I expected."

She leaned forward, as she did so a slender gold chain, which had been attached round her neck, slipped from its fastening and fell on the floor, revealing a tiny gold object.

Lawless, who was nearest to Olga, stooped and lifted the trinket, but as his fingers closed on it, Tinker saw him stare, then the tall man arose to his feet.

"I say, Blake, this is—extraordinary!"

He held out the object on the chain, and Blake took it, studying it for a moment. It consisted of a circlet of gold, and the model of a greyhound—a slender animal—depicted stretching itself out at full speed.

"You know what this is, of course?" Lawless said.

"A King's Messenger badge," Blake commented.

"Well, it's a crib on it," Lawless said. "It is a special badge that a few members of the Voyagers' Club had prepared for themselves."

The tall man straightened his shoulders.

"And so far as I know there were only ten of us all told, who had this badge?" he said. "It was at the outbreak of the Great War. We'd a special dinner, and Lord Hemsley, the newspaper proprietor, you know, was in the chair. I believe I can remember the names of those who were there. In any case, we were all, more or less, detached individuals, each with a separate object—newspaper correspondents for the most part.

"If you remember, the Government asked the members of the Voyagers' Club to volunteer as guides and interpreters to the various armies, and those present at the dinner had had their services accepted. It was Lord Hemsley's idea that we should have a special badge of our own, and this greyhound, with a circle, was struck. It was supposed to represent the special object we were asked to undertake—the getting of news quickly all round the world."

He eyed the dull badge in a grim, detached way.

"Most of the people who had that badge given to them are dead now," he added. "So far as I know there are only three or four of us left—Harpur, the languages man at Oxford; Lord Hemsley, Ninian Bell, the big-game hunter, who's back in Niarobi, myself, and—and, yes, by Heaven, Adrian Steele!"

"Adrian Steele, the 'Mercury' man?"

"Yes, he was one of the original members of that little circle," said Lawless.

Blake turned to Olga.

The conversation between the detective and Lawless had been held in English, and now Blake spoke to her in her own vernacular.

"This badge?" he asked. "Where did you get it?"

Olga glanced at Dimitri for a moment, then she leaned forward.

"It was given to me by—by a friend," she said, "in Moscow. He used to go into Dimitri's restaurant, and although we were not sure, we—we thought he was English."

"What was your friend like?" Lawless asked, turning to Dimitri.

Dimitri drew a deep breath.

"He was a tall man, monsieur, as tall as you. His hair was red—very red, and he had eyes that could look through one. He was a man——was my friend."

"His name?"

"I only knew him as Adrian."

"By James, it was Steele then!"

Lawless's hand reached out and caught Dimitri by the arm.

"This is very important," he said. "Tell me when you saw your friend, Adrian, last."

The youth nodded towards his sister.

"It was at the station, at Moscow, monsieur," he said. "My sister and I were trying to get away by train, and while we were waiting we saw the police come along with my friend, Adrian, between them."

"You mean he had been arrested?"

"Yes, monsieur, and we saw him put into the prisoner's compartment along with a lot of others."

"Where was he going? Have you any idea?"

"I tried to find out, monsieur," Olga interrupted. "I spoke to one of the escort whom I recognised—he was a man from Tomsk—and he told me that they were going back to my own town. He said that all the prisoners were being taken to the Kremlin there."

She looked at Lawless for a moment.

"I dare not speak to—to Dimitri's friend—I was afraid to, but he caught sight of me while I stood beside the train, and later, when the friends of the prisoners had gathered round to speak to them, he leant out and gave me that badge. He said, 'It is a talisman for good luck, little sister,' as he dropped it into my hand."

Dimitri leaned forward.

"Adrian knew that we were trying to get away to England," he said. "I had told him something of our trouble, and it was he who advised us what to do. In fact, he planned our route for us, and but for that we should never have got through."

His eyes turned to Blake.

"Why should you ask these questions, monsieur?" he said. "What does it mean?"

Blake nodded across to Lawless, then turned to the young Russian.

"It means that you have partly solved a mystery that has been discussed in London for the past three weeks," he said. "An English newspaper correspondent, Adrian Steele, was supposed to die of fever in Moscow. His papers were returned to the offices of the newspaper, and with them was a doctor's certificate, also a statement from the British representative there, to the effect that Adrian Steele had been buried in the cemetery."

"How long was that ago, monsieur?"

"I am not sure of the date; probably three weeks or a month ago."

Olga clasped her hands.

"Then it is not true—it is not true!" she cried. "For less than three weeks ago my brother and I saw Monsieur Adrian among the prisoners that were being sent to Siberia."

"To Siberia! Do you mean to say that the Soviet keeps up that pleasant custom?" Lawless demanded.

Dimitri's face paled.

"There is a great deal happening in Russia, monsieur, that the outside world knows nothing of," he said. "There are thousands of unfortunate men condemned to exile in Northern Siberia—to a fate worse than ever befell them under the hands of the Tzar. They are driven out like sheep to die. I have heard stories that would horrify you, monsieur, but they are all kept secret. It is not good for anyone to speak of what is happening in Russia to-day."

He caught at Lawless's arm.

"If what we have told you is of use, you must promise not to reveal from whence it came," he broke out. "We have still a few relations in Tomsk, and if the news spread that we had revealed secrets, they would suffer."

Lawless nodded.

"I know—I know," he returned. "I have had some experience of your present Government, Dimitri. You can leave this thing entirely in the hands of my friend, Mr. Blake. Whatever happens, you will not be drawn into it. That I promise you!"

Mrs. Bardell entered the room at that moment to announce that the spare chamber had been prepared for Olga, and the girl, not without a show of reluctance, was persuaded to go.

Dimitri had been given Tinker's room, and, at Lawless's suggestion, Blake went down with the tall aristocrat to spend the night in his chambers in Jermyn Street.

When they passed down Baker Street they found that already the fire had been subdued, and the great throng had departed.

There were one or two engines still ready in case of emergency, and there were several firemen and policemen standing about the wide entrance of the hotel.

A sudden idea came to Lawless, and he caught Blake by the arm, swinging him round into the entrance.

"We might as well make a few inquiries about the green box"

It was the detective's card which opened the way through the line of policemen, and they found themselves in the water-logged lounge. Then presently the distracted manager came to them.

"The green box? Oh, yes! I had forgotten all about it! Perhaps you will be able to identify the man?"

"What do you mean?"

The manager turned on his heel and beckoned to them to follow. They were led down a long passage, through a small ante-room, into a chamber beyond

The policeman on duty touched his helmet as they entered, and Blake saw there was a heavy cloth over some object that was lying on the table in the centre of the room.

The manager went up to the cloth and removed it, revealing a charred, blackened form.

"He was found on the iron staircase which is used by the servants," he said. "The firemen discovered him between the fifth and sixth floors. He had evidently tried to make his escape, and been choked by another rush of flames and smoke. We have searched him, but could find no papers in his possession. He wasn't a guest in the hotel, for we have searched the register, and there is no one missing."

Then, from under the sheet, the manager produced a small square box.

"This was in his hand," he said. "We haven't opened it yet, for the lock is a powerful one, and requires an expert"

Blake took the receptacle and crossed to the light.

The flames and smoke had done their best to destroy the tough steel, but had failed, and in one corner Blake found a flake of dried, green enamel.

"I am afraid I am not able to identify the man for you," Blake said, "but I am confident that this box belongs to Olga Azmerieff, who, with her brother, occupied rooms 460 and 461."

The manager had already recognised Blake, and he turned to him swiftly.

"Of course, I forgot all about it! I remember now; she was very anxious about a green box. But what does it mean? Why should this man he found with in his possession?"

Blake glanced at the blackened features, and turned away with a shrug of his shoulders.

"That's a point that doesn't concern me," he said quietly; "but I am inclined to think that this fellow, whoever he is, deserves his fate. For he is the man who caused all this trouble for you, and he has paid the penalty with his life."

CHAPTER 2.

Yermak, the Cobbler, Makes a Suggestion—Doubroff Plays a Lone Hand—A Message is Delivered.

WITHIN a stone's throw from Covent Garden there is a large block of tenement buildings that are gained by a tall, iron gateway which leads to a courtyard within.

Bunsell's Buildings stand on a site that was once the scene of many fierce and dramatic episodes in the day when Seven Dials was the haunt of the malefactor and crook. It may be accepted that the majority of the dwellers of this tall building are quite respectable citizens pursuing their varied occupations in a law-abiding manner

Yet the mere fact that the tenements are cheap, and that there is no interference on the part of prying landlords, means that now and again a less respectable element forced its way into a huge tenement of that sort.

The property belongs to the L.C.C., and because they are highly popular, it is necessary to put down one's name an amazingly long interval before it is possible to get a flat. The only other method of obtaining one of these small, desirable suites of rooms is to bribe or buy out an existing tenant.

The entrance to the various blocks communicated with the courtyard, and stone staircases ran up to the balconies of each floor, from whence entry could be obtained into the flats.

About noon on the morning following the fire at the Winchley Hotel, in Baker Street, a tall, broad-shouldered man turned into the gateway of Bunsell's Buildings, and, crossing to the second doorway on his right, climbed to the third floor, and halted at flat 42a.

He knocked—a rather curious knock, for after a single tap, his knuckles drummed on the panel.

The lock was turned and he heard the chain being removed, then the door opened cautiously an inch or two, and a queer face appeared in the gap, eyeing the newcomer for a moment, then the door opened wide and the tall man entered, stalking down the passage and going into the dingily-furnished sitting-room.

The front door was closed behind him, and again the key was turned, and the other man shuffled down the passage and entered the room, revealing himself to be a dwarfed, stunted creature, with a straggling grey beard and quick, furtive eyes.

The little man was a Cossack, with a strong strain of the Mongolian in him, tough and cold-blooded—a fact that was obvious from his wolfish features.

"You have heard the news, Yermak?" the tall man said.

"Yes, Excellency; Ivan has gone!"

The Cossack shrugged his shoulders as though the matter was of little import, then, crossing to the window, he seated himself in a chair there, and picked up the half-finished bag on which he was at work

The visitor drew his cigarette-case from his pocket and lighted one.

He was well-dressed, in a flashy way, and the cut of his garb hinted at New York, as did the shape of his patent-leather shoes.

He stretched out his legs and contemplated his shining footwear for a moment, then glanced again at the Cossack

"Ivan was a fool," he said. "He lost his head! Had he gone the same way as I did he would have been alive now."

The Cossack nodded.

"It isn't everyone who has your Excellency's nerve," he said in his grating tone. "Ivan was a clod!"

The tall man thrust his hand into his pocket and jingled some coins there.

"I gave him the box in his own hands," he

went on, half to himself. "I thought it safer to let him have it, and the result is that the fool has lost it. This morning he was taken to the police-station, and there will be a coroner's inquest held. You are quite sure that they will not be able to trace him here?"

"No fear of that, Excellency," the Cossack returned. "I never permitted Ivan to leave my place with any identification papers on him. That is why London is so much better than Moscow. Here one can move about for weeks at a time without having to produce papers to the police, and without having to explain oneself."

"That is good," the other man returned. "You understand that Ivan must not be identified by you or anyone who knew him. After all, he is dead, and there is no need for us to trouble."

The Cossack glanced across at his guest.

"And what are you going to do now?" he asked, as he sewed diligently at the edge of the bag.

"I am not sure: it is difficult to say. You see, I have been making inquiries, and I find that these two young fools have got in touch with an English friend through this affair."

His dark eyes glinted.

"It took me some time to gather my information, but I managed it. Last night they stayed at a house in Baker Street, occupied by someone who is a detective. Have you heard of a man called Sexton Blake?"

The Cossack lowered his bag and turned his face towards the speaker, and a cackling laugh broke from his lips.

"It is easy to know that you have not been long in London, Monsieur Douhroff," he said, "or you would not have to ask that question! Everybody who has to be careful in this country knows the man Blake."

"What is he?"

"He is a detective; but he is more than that. He doesn't work under the Government, but his name is feared more by people of our kind, Excellency, than any other man in England!"

The Cossack threw back his head and laughed.

"Last night was your unlucky time. It is bad enough to have lost that which you went out to obtain, but it is worse that your victims should have fallen into the hands of Sexton Blake."

The wizened fellow arose to his feet and glanced out of the window for a moment, then turned round towards his companion again.

"I am disturbed," he said. "You know my position here? No one suspects me of having any communication with the Soviet. I am simply old Yermak, the bagmaker, a quiet, old man who works diligently and keeps himself to himself. Am I not naturalised, and with the vote of a respectable British citizen?"

The lips slid back from the blackened teeth, and the cunning features formed into a smile.

"Remember, Monsieur Douhroff, I give you shelter while it is safe, but if you should bring anyone like Blake into the affair you leave me! I have my own work to do, and I cannot permit it to be interfered with by you."

"Yes, yes, that's all right. I don't want you to help me in any way—I simply came here for information."

Nicholas Doubroff squared his broad shoulders.

"I am not afraid of this man, Blake," he went on, lapsing into English, which he spoke with a strong American accent. "I guess I can handle him. I jest wanted to find out what sort of a guy he was."

Yermak shrugged his shoulders.

"You will find him a—a 'hot-stuff' guy, as you would call him. I know what he came here for, but I can tell you that if these papers are now in the hands of Blake you will be well advised to give up any further hope of obtaining them, my friend!"

The bearded lips tightened.

"Remember, that important though it may be for you to obtain these papers, it is even more important that our secret should be kept hidden. You must not appeal to me for help should you fall foul of Sexton Blake. All that you may do now will be as a private individual, and not as an agent to our cause, do you understand?"

Douhroff's brows drew together in a deep frown.

"You seem very scared of this man," he said.

"On the contrary, excellency, I am scared of no one, but I prefer to play my part in the dark."

The bagmaker spread his long, yellow fingers.

"My orders were to help you to obtain the papers by putting you in touch with someone who could assist you in your enterprise. I did so. I brought many men here, and you decided on Ivan. My people also gave you correct information as to where Olga and Dimitri Azmereiff were staying, and my spies acquainted me of their visit to the bank, and their possession of a certain green box. My orders from Moscow were to carry out these things for you, but I have no further commands to perform."

"In other words, you mean you are finished with me, Yermak?"

"Exactly, excellency," the Cossack said with a low bow. "From now, you handle this matter as—as Nicholas Douhroff, the American citizen, and not as Douhroff, of ours!"

The tall, black-haired man arose to his feet with an angry snort.

"Very well, Yermak," he said, "that settles it. I rather expected you to say this, and I had begun to make my own plans. I am not a fool."

"No, excellency, on the contrary, I have had very good reports of you. You are anything but a fool. The way you have handled this affair so far has been splendid. It was a clever idea of yours to allow these two young fools to escape, imagining they weren't followed. It was clever of you to take their photographs in Berlin and send them on ahead so that my men could recognise them when they reached here. Ah, yes, excellency, but a clever man is not able to handle Fate!"

The Cossack seated himself again.

"Last night you made a mistake," he said. "It would have been better had you taken the box and left Ivan to settle with your two victims."

"Ivan didn't know them as well as I did," Douhroff explained. "That is why I trusted him with the box."

He took a turn up and down the room, then came to a halt again, and Yermak noted that the dark face was rather drawn and white.

"You haven't slept much, excellency?" he said.

"I was up half the night," Douhroff returned. "Last night I followed Olga and Dimitri, with these friends of theirs, and saw them go into a house. I hung about, then returned to the hotel, and heard the fate that had overtaken Ivan. While I was in the hotel, this man, Blake, and a friend, a tall man, came in, and they went to see Ivan. It was then that I discovered who Blake was, and when he left the hotel he took the box with him."

"Where did they go?"

"They went down to Jermyn Street," Douhroff said, "and I saw them vanish into residential chambers there. It was late, but I managed to have a word with the night porter. I pretended to be looking for chambers. He told me that the tall man's name was Lawless, and he occupied a suite on the first floor."

"And after?" said Yermak.

"I watched the windows of the first floor, saw lights go on, and saw them go out again. I waited, expecting to see Blake leave, but he didn't, and at last, about two o'clock, I went on down the street and found a Turkish bath, where I stayed the night. But I was out again before eight o'clock, and I watched the chambers. About nine o'clock in the morning a taxi arrived, and Olga and Dimitri emerged from it, with a youth whom I had seen along with them and Blake on the previous night. They all went into the chambers, and about a quarter of an hour later, Blake and the tall man emerged again. I followed them, and they went in a taxi to Fleet Street, and entered the offices of the 'Mercury.'"

Yermak had been listening in a casual way, but as Douhroff spoke the last words he whipped round on his low chair.

"The 'Mercury,'" he said, with a note of dismay in his voice.

"Yes, Yermak, I thought that this would interest you!"

Douhroff came up to the window and looked down at the bearded bagmaker.

"You are thinking about Adrian Steele, I suppose?" he said.

Yermak nodded.

"Can it be possible? But, no! How could Dimitri or Olga know about him?"

Douhroff was silent for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not acquainted with the Adrian Steele affair," he said, "although I heard something about it in Moscow. Of course, it may only have been mere coincidence, but I think it may be worth your while to notify headquarters that this man, Blake, and Lawless, visited the 'Mercury.' From what I can gather our people cannot afford to take any chances in that affair."

"This is news, excellency, disturbing news," the bagmaker returned, and his nervous manner indicated that he was upset. "I shall certainly notify our people."

His small eyes glittered.

"We thought that the Adrian Steele affair was finished," he said. "There were no questions raised here. The story was accepted."

He darted a hard glance at Douhroff.

"If it should happen that, through this affair of yours, the other affair may be reopened again, excellency, I don't think that our people will be very pleased with me."

Douhroff looked angry, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"I cannot be blamed for it," he said. "And apart from that it is only guess work. These two men may have gone to the 'Mercury' in connection with my side of the affair. It may only have been mere coincidence that took them to that newspaper instead of some other."

"There is no coincidence where a man like Sexton Blake is concerned," Yermak warned. "You must not forget that Adrian Steele was in Moscow when Olga and Dimitri were there. You yourself told me that he used to dine in the restaurant where Dimitri was waiter."

A long, lean finger was raised and waved towards the flashily-dressed man.

"It would not be the first time that private concerns have interfered with affairs of State, excellency," the bagmaker said. "It would be a pity, a great pity, if our people decided that you were to blame!"

There was a warning note in his voice that could not be mistaken, and Douhroff's face went pallid beneath the tan.

"You threaten me, eh?"

"What me? The little bagmaker? But, no, excellency. How should I threaten? I only warn!"

The stunted figure picked up the leather again and eyed the neat stitching.

"So far there may be no danger," he said. "But should you discover that you have to choose between losing what the contents of that box may bring you, and betrayal of the true fate that has overtaken Adrian Steele, excellency—I should advise you to give up those little oil wells in Texas."

Yermak stretched out a lean hand and closed it slowly.

"What is the use of little oil wells if this is what happens to you afterwards?" he said.

"I am not going to give them up," Douhroff broke out. "I have friends in America waiting there. There is a company ready to be formed as soon as I get hold of these papers and establish my claim. I dare not go back to America without them. You are an old croaker, Yermak, and you see danger where there is none!"

"On the contrary, excellency, I only see caution where it is necessary," came the quiet reply. "If you should stir up a hornet's nest and cause trouble in Moscow, where shall you hide when the penalty for that be demanded?"

He blinked across at the tall figure.

"Adrian Steele is dead—so——" His open palm gestured towards the ground. "All concerning him is forgotten. The great British public forget very quickly—a week, a fortnight, three weeks, then finish! But if Adrian Steele's name comes up again, and Moscow is troubled, they will want to know why and how!"

He shook his head.

"You will please yourself, excellency," he said. "It may be as you say only coincidence that sent these English detectives to the 'Mercury' office, but out of coincidence there often develops discovery. It would be better for the Azmerieffs to claim their oil wells than for you to lose your life for a single act of folly!"

"I am not going to listen to you, Yermak. You are a croaker—a fool!"

With an angry gesture Nicholas Doubroff threw his half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace, then turned and strode towards the door.

"And I need not ask you for any further help?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Indeed no," Yermak returned. "I have no desire to be one of a funeral party. I hate death—it is so final!"

The tall man swore under his breath and fidgeted with the door.

"But you are not going to ignore what I told you?"

"By no means," Yermak returned. "To-day, messengers will receive the news concerning this visit to the 'Mercury.' Moscow shall learn that Mr. Blake and his friend called there, and if Mr. Blake and his friend, or anyone else from the 'Mercury' find it necessary to visit Moscow, a welcome shall be waiting them!"

"I don't think they will do anything of the sort," Doubroff said. "In any case, I am going to risk it."

"Risk what?"

"I am going to make another attempt to get those papers," the tall man said. "They are in this man, Lawless', flat now, where Olga and Dimitri are staying. I thought you might have sent someone to help me, but if you won't do so, I shall tackle the matter myself!"

He lounged out of the door, slamming it behind him, and the Cossack bagmaker did not stir until he heard the outer door close, then his lackadaisical pose vanished, and with a quick sweep of the hand he dropped his bag and rose to his feet, hurrying into the inner room. Stooping, he thrust his hand under the bed and drew out a telephone, turning the handle several times till a reply ring came, then he lifted the receiver and spoke:

"That you, Rostam?"

"Yes, barin."

"There is a man who will be leaving through the gates in a moment"—Yermak described Doubroff with painstaking care—"follow him. Let me know what he does, where he goes. I'll be at our rendezvous at seven o'clock to-night; telephone me there, you understand?"

"Yes, barin, and if he should attempt to escape?"

"No, no. He will not do that. Don't interfere with him. Just watch."

The private telephone was replaced under the bed.

It is very doubtful whether the stolid, broad-shouldered porter of that building knew that a private wire had been run down from the third floor to a tiny flat on the ground floor, near the main entrance, where a certain Polish tailor lived.

Fifteen minutes later, when Doubroff swaggered through that gateway, a lean, hunch-backed man, with an alpaca bundle under his arm, shuffled out behind him.

"Going for another batch of trouses, mate?" a lounging man at the gateway called as the dingy figure of Rostam emerged, to be answered by the quiet, submissive grin from the Polish Jew.

"Ja, my friend; more trouses!"

"Lummy, you are a 'og for work," the lounger commented, as the shabby figure shuffled off down the narrow pavement at the heels of the tall, swaggering Doubroff.

Nicholas Doubroff was a clever man, and had performed many services for the Soviet; but

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he had lost a great deal of the Russian caution and cunning, owing to the fact that he had lived and mixed with men of a less subtle race.

America has a trick of absorbing all creeds and conditions of men into a vast system, and the process of transforming them into Yankees doesn't take very long.

Doubroff had all the American desire for the eternal dollar, and those oil wells in Texas were more to him than the keeping of a secret that might endanger the plots and counter-plots of the men he served.

But had Doubroff known that the shabby figure with the alpaca bundle, whom he caught sight of once as he crossed the street, was Nemesis, he might have hesitated twice before he carried out the project that was in his mind.

It was about two o'clock when Doubroff turned into Jermyn Street, and he passed the discreet doorway that led to the chambers in which Lawless had a suite, then came back again slowly, and finally entered the hall.

A man in his shirt-sleeves appeared, and Doubroff spoke to him in a real Yankee drawl.

"I'm looking for some chambers," he said. "Can you fix me up here?"

"Afraid not, sir. There are no vacant flats, and not likely to be, either."

"Well, I heard otherwise. Someone told me that the right-hand flat on the first floor was likely to fall vacant this week."

"Mr. Lawless's flat. Oh, no, sir, he never lets it go, although he may be away for weeks at a stretch."

"Are you quite sure," said Doubroff. "Maybe, if I had a word with Mr. Lawless——"

"Can't do that, sir. Mr. Lawless is out at present. As a matter of fact, I don't expect him back, for he has handed over his flat to two friends, a young lady and her brother. Mr. Lawless's valet came along here about half an hour back and took his kit away. They live in a square off Hyde Park."

"Darn it; that's jest my luck," Doubroff said. "I knew he was going to hand it over, and I expect these two young people got in here ahead of me."

"I hardly think so, sir. I think they are friends of Mr. Lawless."

"Are they in now?"

"Yes, sir; in fact, they will not be able to go out until they get some clothes."

The porter was a somewhat communicative individual, but perhaps Doubroff's easy-going manner had something to do with it.

"I understand that they were in that fire in Baker Street, sir, and they lost everything they possessed. A couple of dressmakers have been in already for the young lady, and her brother has had a tailor in."

Doubroff slipped his hand into his pocket and drew out a Treasury-note, which he handed to the fellow.

"All right, my friend," he said; "very sorry to trouble you. I guess I'll move along, but I like the look of these chambers, and I am sorry you ain't got anything to offer."

Doubroff was very satisfied as he emerged from the chambers again.

There was a restaurant almost opposite, and he entered it, climbing to the first floor, and finding a seat near the window, where he ordered a meal.

From the window he had a full view of the entrance to the chambers, and a long hour passed, then a taxi drew up, and Doubroff saw Blake and Lawless emerge and enter the chambers.

He leaned forward, watching the two figures, as they vanished and noted that the taxi remained outside. They were gone for about twenty minutes, and when they emerged again Doubron saw that Lawless was carrying a valise, which he bundled into the taxi; then he and Blake entered the vehicle and were driven off.

"That looks as though the coast were clear for me," Doubroff muttered to himself, eyeing the windows opposite. "Last night I trusted to that fool Ivan, and he bungled it. To-night I trust only to myself."

He leaned back, sipping his coffee, and presently he saw the curtain of the window opposite move, and he had a vision of Olga Azmerieff.

The girl looked down into the street for a few seconds, then turned away, and obviously spoke to someone behind her. The curtain dropped into place and she vanished, and Doubroff, his chin in his hand, his elbow resting on the table, studied the building opposite.

He saw that next to the chambers was a two-storeyed, low-roofed shop—a hatter's. The building was obviously a straggler from a by-gone day, when Jermyn Street was a quiet residential quarter.

So low was the hatter's establishment that the roof was only just in line with the windows of the flat on the first floor.

Doubroff noted that it would be perfectly easy for an active man—and he was all that—to gain the broad ledge which ran along below the windows of the suite.

It seemed to Doubroff that this easy way of getting at Olga and her brother was a kindly arrangement of a special providence, and a quiet glint came into his eyes.

He paid for his tardy meal and emerged into Jermyn Street, crossing to the hat shop. He noted that there was a covered passage on the right side of the shop, and that this passage ran along beside the tall wall of a church.

Doubroff went on up the passage, and found himself in a narrow, paved yard. He stood there for a moment, studying the church wall. It was about nine feet high, a rather formidable barrier, but there was a coping-stone some three or four feet from the ground, and, given the opportunity, it was quite possible for a man to climb on the wall and go on up the back of the hatter's premises, and gain the roof.

Doubroff had been well aware that it would be a somewhat risky job to try and climb to the roof from the front of the building overlooking Jermyn Street, but this back way made a very satisfactory substitute.

He returned down the passage, and this time Rostam had a rather long chase. He followed Doubroff down through the Strand and across Waterloo Bridge, finally turning into New Cut. On either side of the road were the coster barrows, and Doubroff, passing along them, halted at a stall on which various types of laces were displayed.

The proprietor of the stall, a black-bearded, hook-nosed man, glanced somewhat doubtfully at Doubroff, as the tall fellow leaned over the laces, but the latter made a signal, crooking his finger and placing it against his palm. The proprietor of the stall made a similar sign, then, under the pretext of bargaining over a piece of lace, Doubroff spoke for a few moments. The hook-nosed man selected a square of newspaper from the back of the stall, wrote something on one corner of it, then the piece of lace was wrapt up, and Doubroff handed the man a coin and walked on.

But lower down the busy street Yermak's spy saw Doubroff unfold the parcel and glance at the writing, then the strip of lace was thrust into the man's pocket, and presently he turned into another street and vanished into a grimy house, over which a weather-beaten sign announced to the world that there were single beds for gentlemen at a shilling a night.

Yermak's man hung about on the opposite side of the street, and a long wait followed. Yermak had ordered his associate to report to him somewhere about seven o'clock, and it was getting on towards that time now. Finally, the shuffling figure crossed the street and entered the house.

It was the usual variety of cheap lodging-house. One of the rooms had been turned into a dining-room, and beyond it was the kitchen in which the lodgers, if they chose, could cook their own food.

The man with the bundle glanced into the dining-room and the kitchen, then went on up the creaking stairs to the first-floor. He found that the rooms there had been made into cubicles with the aid of partitions of rough canvas, and, finally, at the end of the passage he saw Doubroff lying outstretched on a cot, fast asleep.

A glance into the cubicle, however, revealed a certain fact to the spy. Doubroff was in his undergarments, and the watcher noted that the well-cut clothes had vanished, while in their place, lying on a chair beside the cot, was a suit of rough working clothes.

There was also a cap and a pair of cheap boots beside the chair.

Doubroff was lying on his back, snoring slightly, and, after a moment, Yermak's man dropped his bundle, then, leaning towards the door, he knocked on it.

There was a grunt and a gurgle, and Doubroff spoke.

"Who's that?"

"Been sent to waken you, mister," the spy said.

The cubicle was in half gloom, for there was only a single light in the centre of the passage.

The man heard Doubroff move in the cot, and he saw him reach for a wrist-watch which was under the pillow.

"You silly fool, it's not much after seven o'clock. I don't want to be wakened until ten o'clock. Go away, confound you!"

"Sorry, mister, I must have made a mistake."

The clever little ruse had been successful, and Yermak's man reached for his bundle, shuffled off down the passage again, and went down the stairs and out into the street, without a soul meeting him.

He headed straight back for Soho, and in one of the side streets behind the Palace he entered one of those many small restaurants, where a throng of diners were feeding hastily, as is the wont of the Continental individual.

At a table in one corner Yermak and two other men were seated, and Rostam, dropping into a chair at a table near to them, slipped his bundle under the seat and ordered coffee.

When the waiter went again, Yermak's man produced a scrap of paper and wrote his message on it, then, taking a cigarette out of his pocket, he fumbled for a moment as though he wanted a light.

Yermak, some three or four feet away, turned and held out a box of matches.

"You want a light—eh?"

"Yes, sir, thank you."

The box was tossed across. It would have taken a very keen observer to note that, as Rostam took a match from the box, he slipped the piece of paper into it. When the cigarette was lighted the box was returned, and, so far as Rostam was concerned, his duties were faithfully carried out.

Whatever might happen to Doubroff now was no concern of his!

Half an hour later, when he had finished his coffee, Rostam took his bundle again and returned to Bunsell's Buildings, where he settled down to his legitimate task of tailoring, work that he performed as carefully as that other and more interesting occupation of spying.

CHAPTER 3.

At the Office of the "Mercury"—The Secret of the Cross-headings—Doubroff Makes his Stroke—and Fails.

IT was about ten o'clock in the morning when Blake and Lawless entered the offices of the "Mercury," little dreaming that their visit was being observed by a potential enemy.

Blake gave the clerk at the counter his card, and he was led along the wide passage into an anteroom. He and Lawless had to wait some minutes before another messenger appeared, and they were ushered into the well-furnished room of Mr. Warndale, the editor.

Warndale, a keen-looking, studious man, gave Blake his hand.

"How are you, Blake?" he said. "What's wrong? What has the 'Mercury' done? When Baker Street comes to Fleet Street, and especially represented by you, there is always a reason for that movement!"

Blake smiled.

"Have you ever met Mr. Lawless?" he said, indicating his tall companion.

Warndale shook hands, regarding the handsome face steadily for a moment.

"I don't think we have met," said Lawless.

"No; that's true," Warndale agreed; "but I've heard about you. You are a voyager, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I know Lord Hemsley very well," Warndale said, "and I remember now that your name was several times on his lips."

"I hope he spoke well of me?" Lawless said, with a smile.

Warndale laughed.

"He said you were out of your element, that's all. That you ought to have been born in the sixteenth century; but that I would take as a compliment, for it removes you out of the category of we humdrum folk!"

"Where is Lord Hemsley?" Lawless asked. "I have lost touch with things in London this last five or six months."

"Didn't you hear about him then?" Warndale asked. "He was sent out as a special British Commission to inquire into the famine affair in Russia five months ago. Unfortunately he caught a chill at Nijni Novgorod. He recovered, and from then no one was able to trace him. So far as we know, he set off to follow his Commission, but it was in the winter-time and, from the vague reports that we've received, it appears that poor Hemsley was travelling in a drotsky in a very lonely part of the country, and was overtaken by a snowstorm. The driver missed the road and ran into a river. In any case, the drotsky was found there three days later submerged in the stream, and there was no sign of the driver or His lordship."

Warndale shrugged his shoulders.

"He was rather too adventurous at all times, was Hemsley," Lawless agreed. "He would never allow any ordinary accident of nature to prevent him carrying out a task."

"What happened to the Commission?" Blake asked.

"I don't think they did very much good after that," Warndale returned slowly. "In any case, they came back to England again two months after we received the news about Hemsley."

There was a moment's silence, then Blake, slipping his hand into his pocket, produced a little gold badge.

"Do you happen to know if this belonged to your man, Adrian Steele?"

"Steele?"

Warndale was all interest at once, and he leaned forward, lifting the badge.

"I am almost sure it does belong to him," he said. "He would never explain what it meant, but I remember he used to wear it on his watch chain."

He turned the badge over, revealing a plain surface behind.

"Lawless and I are rather interested," Blake said. "We have been studying that badge, and, if you will look round the back rim, you will notice that there is something scraped there by a pencil. It looks to me like shorthand, but, if it is, it is not ordinary Pitman."

The lines were very minute, and Warndale took a reading-glass from a drawer in his desk, then bending over the badge, he studied it for a long moment.

There was a bewildered look in his eyes as he glanced up at Blake again.

"You are quite right, Mr. Blake," he said. "It is shorthand, and it is a special shorthand, which we use on the 'Mercury.' As a matter of fact, Adrian Steele invented it, as a means of communicating with the paper when he had something secret to send by messenger. We have to be up to all sorts of tricks nowadays, but I can tell you that the capture of interesting copy is a big task, with so much competition."

"Is it shorthand, then?" Lawless asked.

"Yes, but I cannot understand what it means, although this is what it says."

Warndale took up a pencil and wrote rapidly as he transcribed the message:

"Cross headings. Last article explains. Trusting to luck to get through."

Warndale leaned back.

"You know, of course, that Steele is dead, poor chap? He died at Moscow about three weeks ago. How do you come to be in possession of this badge?"

"It was handed to a girl, Olga Azmerieff, on the station at Moscow," Blake answered, "by a man who I am convinced was Steele."

"When did that happen?"

"On the fifteenth of last month," Blake returned.

"The fifteenth—fifteenth; but that is impossible! This is only the third, and we had definite news that Steele had died earlier in the month, somewhere about the tenth."

"I cannot help that," Blake returned grimly. "The fact remains that this badge was handed to Olga by its owner."

He leaned across the desk.

"And the owner was a prisoner, Mr. Warndale, one of a party of political prisoners that was in a train about to leave Moscow for the interior."

Warndale raised his hand to his head.

"But, my dear chap, there must be some mistake. Are you trying to make me believe that this story about Steele is a lie? You forget we had a communication from a British representative there verifying the facts as stated by the Russian Government."

The editor of the "Mercury" looked grim.

"I admit that I thought something had hap-

pened to Steele," he said, "for I know the sort of man he is, and we took every precaution in the matter. We sent a man out there especially to look into it, and he interviewed the people in the hotel where Steele lived, and also saw the Russian doctor who attended him in the illness. As a matter of fact, he took a photograph of the grave, and came back with Steele's papers. Indeed, our man brought with him a long report that Steele had been writing when he was struck down by the fever.

"The Russian authorities had collected all his papers and put them under seal, and the article was there just as poor Steele had written it. The final sentence had not been written. I believe it was black fever that took him, and you know how suddenly that strikes!"

"This last article?" said Blake. "Did you publish it?"

"Oh, yes; it appeared about twelve days ago."

"I should like to see it."

The editor touched a bell, and one of the clerks appeared. He gave the required orders, and four or five minutes later the files of the paper for that date were produced, and Warndale, turning the pages, halted at the leader page of the issue he had mentioned.

"Here it is," he said. "We made a special of it on the leader page."

It was a three-quarter column article, heavily leaded, and was in Adrian Steele's best style. He had always wielded a trenchant pen, and his masterly English and clean-cut way of placing his facts before the reader, had won for him an enviable reputation.

Lawless and Blake read the article together. It was a statement concerning the general conditions of life in Moscow, and in its way it was a bald indictment of the prodigacy and artificialness of the life there.

"Steele always hit out pretty hard," Warndale said, "and of course we all know there is money in Russia, although the greater part of it is in the wrong hands. Still, as you see, the Russian Government allowed the article to come through to us without being censored, and that, in itself, seemed to indicate that they had no personal objections to Steele's presence there."

"It certainly looks as though they allowed him to say what he liked," said Lawless, with a grudging nod. "What do you say, Blake?"

The keen, blue eyes of the private detective twinkled for a moment.

"I know the Russian rather well, Lawless," said Blake, "and for sheer cunning he ranks very close to the Chinaman where diplomacy is concerned. To put the matter bluntly, I am of opinion that the Russian Government allowed this dangerous article to go through in order to prove that they had no quarrel with Steele."

"What do you mean?"

Blake smiled drily.

"I have never been in the position of desiring to get rid of a man," he said, "but if I did happen to be in that position, and wanted to escape the consequences, my first idea would be to establish to the world that the man was a personal and close friend of mine; that I would not gain by his death; that, in fact, there would be no reason for fastening the blame on me."

"I see your point," Warndale said. "You mean that the Government allowed this article to come through, despite its drastic denunciations of their methods, simply to indicate that Steele had not been interfered with by them."

"That is my way of regarding it," said Blake, "but of course it is merely a theory."

He glanced at the article again, then looked up at the editor.

"That message on the gold badge," he said. "It mentions something about cross-headings?"

"Oh, no," said Warndale, "we never cross-head our leaders."

"But Steele mentions cross headings for the last article," Blake put in. "Do you happen to have the manuscript of this?"

"I dare say we have; I'll inquire, but I can assure you it was in Steele's handwriting. I read it myself."

"Oh, I don't doubt that, but I should like to see the manuscript myself."

The digging up of that manuscript took some time, and twenty minutes elapsed before the messenger arrived from the printers with an envelope containing the original article.

Compositors and readers are not by any means of the cleanest-handed of men. Their work usually leaves them with blackened thumbs and fingers, and that particular manuscript was grimed and smudged.

It had been written in that perfect longhand which Steele had developed. The leaves had been torn from a pad, and there were thirty or forty of them.

On the first page half-way down were a few words underlined with pencil; the words themselves were in the body of the text.

The whole sentence ran:

"A few days ago our correspondent, Adrian Steele, had occasion to visit one of the largest theatres."

The words underlined were, "our correspondent."

Blake indicated them.

"He meant that as the first cross-heading, I suppose?" he said.

"Oh, yes," Warndale agreed. "Wherever you find words underlined, it means that they were considered by Steele to be the strong point in each section, and were used as cross-headings."

"Can you give me a sheet of paper," Blake said.

Warndale and Lawless exchanged glances, then the editor handed the man from Baker Street a clean sheet.

Blake seated himself and began to go through the pile of manuscript, writing a few words now and again.

Lawless had come round to Warndale's side, and the two men, watching Blake, saw the face of the detective harden slightly as he became concentrated and interested.

Leaf after leaf was turned over; each leaf supplying another few words which Blake wrote down. When the last sheet was turned, Blake arose to his feet with a quiet catch of his breath.

"Clever—extremely clever," he said. "By James, Adrian Steele has saved himself. Read this!"

He handed the sheet he had been writing on across the desk, and Lawless leaned over the editor's shoulder to read.

The various cross-headings had now been formed into one long sentence, and, as Lawless read it, his handsome face revealed the utter amazement that came to him.

"Our correspondent—a prisoner—from choice—The Soviet believes—him to be—a dangerous visitor—going to Tomsk—to visit the kremlin—hoping to solve—a great secret—no further news—until truth is established."

"I am convinced that Steele simply wrote that article in order to weave in this message," Blake's voice broke the silence. "He must have known what was coming to him. In fact, from that first part of the message I should think he actually did something in order to be made a prisoner. As you know, Warndale, Tomsk is in the heart of Siberia, the capital there, and Lawless and I have already heard that there were some curious things happening in that far-off place. We have proofs that the Soviet are sending prisoners there, just as they used to be sent in the old days."

Warndale pushed back his chair and arose to his feet.

"By James, I will see into this at once," he said, his face paling. "Steele a prisoner in Tomsk. I am going to get on to the Foreign Office immediately."

He reached for the telephone, but Blake's hand fell on the outstretched fingers.

"I should not do that, if I were you." Blake said. "Don't you see that Steele himself planned this matter. His message distinctly says, 'from choice.'"

Warndale's arm fell to his side, but his manner was decidedly doubtful.

"You mean that I have to let this affair go? Impossible!"

"I don't say that, Mr. Warndale," Blake resumed, "but I do say that if you made an immediate protest now, that if such a protest were sent to Russia, Adrian Steele would suffer. There would be no mistake about his death this time."

"But it seems incredible—unbelievable!"

"There is nothing incredible in Russia," Blake said. "Every second man you meet is a conspirator. The country seeths with malcontents. It always has been in that state!"

"What is your idea? I should be glad if you would explain?"

Blake took a turn up and down the room, then halted in front of the desk.

"I am merely theorising," he said. "But my idea is that Steele has discovered that there is a secret; that there is something hidden in the kremlin at Tomsk, and he is out to find what that is. In order to gain his end, he would have to get to Tomsk, and to gain entry into the kremlin, he could only go either as an official, or a prisoner. The first course was, obviously, impossible for him, so he chose the second!"

"You mean that he deliberately allowed himself to be locked up?"

Lawless laughed.

"It is just the sort of thing that Adrian Steel would do, Warndale," he commented.

"In all probability Steele had already fallen foul of the authorities," Blake resumed, "and they may even have threatened him, as is their custom. When Steele made his discovery, I take it that he set to work to do something really big, that would make the Soviet regard him as a dangerous man—one to be removed! He may even have heard of the plan for his removal, and, urged by his desire to get to Tomsk, may have helped it."

"Then you think that Steele probably assisted the Soviet authorities to hamboozle the British representative in Moscow?"

"I should not be at all surprised. From what I have heard of Mr. Steele he was a one-idea man, and would let nothing get in his way. If by pretending to fall blindly into the Soviet plot in order to get to Tomsk, I am sure he would. His only danger lay in the fact that he might have been discovered sending you this message with the cross-headings, which you received after the report of his death, so as to re-assure you on that score. Even his trick of handing this badge to Olga Azmerieff indicated that he was very much on the alert. You see, he knew that Olga and her brother were trying to get to London, for, as they told us, he planned out their route of escape for them."

Blake smiled grimly.

"I suppose Steele wanted to be able to say later on that he had tried to communicate with you, Warndale," the detective added. "He knew that he was doing an unofficial thing, and one which would probably get him into trouble, and most likely he salved his conscience by sending the cross-headings and the messenger badge. The odds, of course, were very much against this badge ever turning up, but from what I can make of Mr. Steele he didn't mind very much if you received it or not; so long as he could say to you later that he had tried to make you understand, he would be quite satisfied."

"By James, you are perfectly right," Warndale broke out. "Steele is just that sort of man. We could never keep him in hand. He was always up to something wild, as you know, and I remember quite distinctly that this time I told him he was to keep inside the law. It is not always so easy to handle a firebrand,

Mr. Blake, although he may be an exceedingly able and clever man!"

John Lawless laughed.

"I don't think there are many who could handle Adrian Steele," he said. "That red head of his is a beacon of danger. He has a way of pushing himself right into the front and taking all the humps that come along."

Warndale dropped back in his chair again and drummed on the desk in front of him.

"But what are we going to do about this?" he said. "Allowing that your theory that Adrian Steele is still alive, he must be at Tomsk, a prisoner. Do you suggest that I have to sit here and wait events? That I am to make no attempt to get in touch with him?"

"I don't see what else you can do, sir," Blake returned.

Lawless glanced at Blake; then turned to Warndale.

That conversation which Blake and Tinker had held with the tall aristocrat was still rankling in Lawless's brain, and here was another and even greater opportunity of getting his own back.

"There is a way, Mr. Warndale," he said slowly. "Why not send someone, say Mr. Blake, here, to Tomsk, and get in touch with Steele?"

Blake whipped round and glanced at Lawless, and the tall man chuckled.

"I certainly meant to send someone," Warndale said, "and, as you have enlightened me on this matter, Blake, I could not make a better choice than yourself."

He reached out for the grimy sheets of manuscript.

"You solved the secret of the cross-headings, Mr. Blake," he went on, "so you really have opened up the track so far as Steele is concerned, and I think it only right that you should follow it. The "Mercury" will stand all expenses, of course, and I shall see to it that you go with the full protection of the British Government."

Blake laughed.

"The British Government's protection ends, I am afraid, on the borders of Russia, Mr. Warndale," he said, "and, if I am going, I shall do so in my own way."

"Then it is settled?" Warndale said. "I appoint you as special correspondent of the 'Mercury,' Mr. Blake, from now."

Blake nodded across to the tall aristocrat opposite him.

"I shall require an assistant," he said; "in fact, it may be worth my while to take two. When you are making these appointments, Mr. Warndale, please add the name of Lawless, and also Tinker to it. I have been shouldered into this affair, but I am not going to let my friend, here, stand back and chuckle. I will find Adrian Steele for you, and will get to the bottom of the mystery of the prisoner of the kremlin, but Lawless will be there to see me do it!"

"Take as many as you like," Mr. Warndale said, "for the 'Mercury' is a wealthy paper, and we have all been deeply distressed over the reported death of Adrian Steele. If you can bring that redbeaded firebrand back with you, Blake, you can name your own price!"

"Very well," Blake said. "I'll take over this job, but on one condition; that is, that I make my own arrangements for the whole affair, and you don't reveal to a soul what's going to happen?"

"You mean that I mustn't even communicate with Steele's relations?"

"Yes, this matter must be a secret between we three and my assistant," said Blake quietly. "I may have to ask you to put a paragraph in your paper presently concerning myself, but that will be a mere blind. You see, Mr. Warndale, Olga and her brother are in London, and they have been followed by an agent of the Soviet. There are no cleverer spies in the world than these people, and I wish to take no chances. I should not be at all surprised to know that even at this moment some agent has been ordered to keep touch with me, because of what happened last night. I don't want to find myself turned back at the frontier of Russia, nor do I want to find myself landed in a serious fix, if I manage to get over the frontier."

"I will do anything you say, Blake," Warndale agreed. "I know you, and I am prepared to leave the matter entirely in your hands, and now, just by way of clinching the arrangements you had better have lunch with me?"

The "Mercury" is a very old-established newspaper, and among one of its minor arrangements is the fact that on the roof of the building there is a domed room, in which the editor-in-chief can on occasion lunch with friends of his.

There is a very good kitchen, and an able chef, and that meal was a pleasant one, which Lawless thoroughly enjoyed.

Already that irresponsible soul was smelling adventure, and his quiet cheery talk at the table indicated just how he felt.

"I think that you said you wanted Lawless as an assistant?" Warndale declared at last. "You had better be careful, Blake, I see trouble in that wild eye facing me, and were I in your place I should think twice before I took him along. Aren't you the man, Lawless, who arrested that Egyptian agitator by punching him in the jaw and stuffing him into a car in the teeth of about ten thousand followers?"

Lawless rubbed his chin.

"That was pure accident, Warndale," Lawless said, "I was listening to the fellow and had no intention of interfering" — Blake chuckled, and turned his head—"It is quite right—I only went there to listen, but he began to jaw about the Australian troops and their work during the War. That got my goat, and I climbed on the platform to argue with him. Even then I wouldn't have done anything if he hadn't put his greasy paw on me. That settled it!"

"What did you do with the fellow afterwards?"

Lawless ran his fingers through his hair.

"I dumped him in the Nile, ducked him three times for luck," he said.

"I know there was a warrant out for your arrest all over the East," Warndale remarked quietly. "We had a two-column article dealing with it, sent across to me by our man. Adrian Steele was in the office at the time it came."

Lawless laughed.

"That was part of our old plan," he said. "We all had to stand by each other, no matter where we were; in fact, that's why I am going to Russia now, for the sight of that old badge made me remember."

It was about two o'clock when Lawless and Blake left the "Mercury" offices, and for the next half hour the private detective was very busy.

It is advisable not to state here just exactly what Blake did during this half-hour, lest the information might come into wrong hands. It must suffice to say that, inside this period, Blake pulled certain wires, whereby passports for himself and Lawless and Tinker, passports that were not made out in their own names, became available for them.

"I knew it could be done," Lawless said, at the end of the hour, when they were heading back for Jermyn Street, "but I never realised it could be carried out so quickly."

Blake smiled.

"It is just knowing where to go to in the first place, old chap."

They had arranged to call at Jermyn Street in order to collect the valise belonging to Lawless, for the tall aristocrat had already decided to place his flat at the disposal of the two Russian refugees until the time came for them to travel to America.

To Tinker had been relegated the task of booking passages, and making the preliminary arrangements for Olga and her brother, for, as the reader is aware the green box had been restored to them and a glance through the papers had satisfied Blake that their claims to the derelict land, in the oil-bearing neighbourhood mentioned, would be recognised by the American Government.

Tinker had not returned when Lawless and Blake entered the chambers in Jermyn Street and, after a quiet chat with Olga and her brother, the detective and Lawless returned to the taxi with the latter's valise, and, went off to the quiet square in Hyde Park where Blake had the task of breaking the news to the silver-haired, beautiful old woman, who regarded the tall, happy-go-lucky Lawless as the apple of her eye.

"I'll be all right this time, mater," Lawless said, putting one arm round the slender shoulder and giving her a warm hug. "I am travelling in Blake's outfit, as valet. My name is Thomkins, and I am supposed to be a wooden-headed brusher of clothes and polisher of boots!"

"That would not be so bad if I only thought you were going to brush boots," the countess sighed.

They had tea with the old dame, then Lawless and Blake went on to Baker Street, where they dressed for dinner.

Half-way through the meal the telephone-bell sounded, and Tinker's voice came over the wire.

"I'm down at Lawless's place, guv'nor," he said. "I think I have fixed up everything. Olga and her brother can sail by the Mauretania on Saturday. I managed to get a couple of spare berths, and I have been to the American Consul to have their passports vised."

"All right, young 'un! You have done a good day's work. What about dinner?"

"They have asked me to stay and have some food here," Tinker returned, "and I think I will. Here's Olga, wants to speaks to you."

The silvery voice of the Russian girl sounded on the 'phone.

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Blake," she said. "You have been so kind—so wonderful. You must let me know what all this has cost you, and Mr. Lawless, for my brother and I hope to repay one day!"

"That's all right, Mademoiselle Olga," said Blake. "Wait till you get out to your oil mines and make a fortune. That's time enough to talk of payment."

"You have heard nothing about—about Donbroff?" Olga asked.

"Not a word. The coroner's inquest is taking place to-morrow; there has been no one along to identify the man, but I have not much doubt that he was Donbroff's associate."

"I am afraid of Donbroff," Olga said. "While he is alive I fear him."

"You are quite safe where you are, Mademoiselle Olga," Blake returned, "and, as you remain under our protection in England until you leave for America you need not worry."

"It is the papers I am afraid about," the girl said. "We have them here, and, after that first attempt, I am almost sure that Donbroff will try again. Won't you come in to-night, if only for a little while?"

Blake turned to Lawless.

"We might as well run down there later on and have a chat with them," Lawless agreed when Blake put the question.

Blake turned to the 'phone again.

"All right, Mademoiselle Olga; we will come down to see you."

"Thank you—oh, thank you so much! You must not think me foolish, but I have had a feeling all day that that dreadful man was quite near to us."

Lawless and Blake finished their dinner in Baker Street, then went on to the club in Pall Mall.

Lawless recognised a virile-looking man, in the early forties, who had been on a military commission in Poland, and they entered into a [illegible] conversation concerning present Russian affairs.

"There's a lot happening there we know nothing about," Lawless's friend observed. "We have all sorts of tales coming through from Thibet and China. I am afraid it is going to be a long, long time before Russia settles down, even in the old groove. That great wild country has always been a thorn in the flesh of we Europeans, as you know, and it will take years before it is settled. People in this country seem to forget that the whole of England and Scotland and Wales could be dumped in the centre of Siberia—and lost!"

Lawless grinned.

"That's quite true, Beresford," he said. "We British are inclined to think that our island is no end of a place—and forget that, although it's darned good, it's darned small!"

The conversation had been interesting, and it was with a start of surprise that Blake glanced up at the clock to see that it was getting on towards midnight.

"Come along, old chap!" he said to Lawless. "Time we got round to your chambers, or we'll find they've got tired of waiting for us and have gone to bed!"

They went up St. James's Street, and turned along Jermyn Street, gaining the chambers. At night-time Jermyn Street is somewhat dark, for the lamps are at long intervals, and the shops are usually shuttered and unlit. It was light enough inside the hall of the chambers, however, and Blake and Lawless hurried up the wide staircase.

As they halted to ring the bell, Blake thought he heard a shuffling footfall, and turned his head.

He was just in time to see the door of the flat opposite close noiselessly.

"Who lives over there?" he asked.

"Chap named Sphrahl. Got pots of money. I believe, a Roumanian wine merchant, but I don't think he's living in his flat just now. In any case, I haven't seen him going in and out for some time now."

Lawless had not observed the door closing, and Blake dismissed the matter with a shrug of his shoulders.

A moment later, in answer to their ring of the bell, the door of Lawless's flat opened, and Olga smiled at them across the threshold. She was wearing one of her new dresses, a simple, girlish gown, that set off her slender form to perfection. She held out her small hands.

"We had given you up," she said. "Mr. Tinker has gone home, and we thought that you were not coming."

She nodded to Lawless.

"It is so kind of you, monsieur, to lend us this beautiful flat," she said. "My brother has had two baths already. It is so long since we have enjoyed anything that is civilised."

They found Dimitri in the big sitting-room busily engaged in studying an English magazine.

Blake and Lawless sank into deep chairs with their backs to the window, while Olga hurried away from the room, to return presently with coffee; then, after she had served her guests, she disappeared once more, returning with the blistered, blackened green box.

"I forget so easily," she said, putting her hand to her forehead. "You gave us full information, but I wish you would go over these papers just once again, and let my brother and me know what to do."

Lawless drew his chair to the table, and the girl unlocked the box, taking out the papers it contained.

Lawless's room was lighted by an alabaster globe, in which a powerful electric lamp shed a soft radiance down in the centre of the room; the rest of the sitting-room was in semi-darkness, and the group round the table became absorbed in the task on hand.

A tall figure that had slipped from the roof of the low house on the left, and had worked its way along the wide ledge, gained the window, and, through a chink in the heavy curtains, peered into the lighter interior.

It was Doubroff, and, although for a moment, a dismayed expression came into his eyes, as he saw the number of occupants in the room, they cleared again, and, slipping his hand into his pocket, the rogue touched the cold butt of a revolver.

After all he was armed and it would not be the first time that he had held up men at the point of a weapon.

The upper half of the window had been drawn down for ventilation purposes and Doubroff, leaning forward now, began to lift the lower sash cautiously. It was well-made and it slid noiselessly upward.

The night was a calm one, without wind, and there was no indication of Doubroff's presence there, the heavy curtain concealing any movement and deadening any sound.

At last, when the window was wide open, the man slid into the room, halting for a moment behind the curtains, then, feeling for the gap in the centre of them, Doubroff slipped his other hand into his pocket and drew out the revolver.

With a quick, cat-like step, he was through the curtains, allowed them to drop behind him, and his harsh voice rang out in the room.

"Hands up!"

His dramatic entry had been carried out amazingly well.

Blake and Lawless, leaning over the table, swung round to find themselves covered by that vicious-looking automatic.

Dimitri dropped back in his chair with a cry of alarm, while Olga, with a swift grab, caught at the papers on the table.

"Quick! Hands up, or I fire!"

There was no mistake in the deadly meaning in that voice, Doubroff was of that type of desperado to whom life is cheap. His cold, black eyes held murder in them as he glanced along the weapon.

Lawless had made a half-move as though to leap at the man, but Blake caught him by the shoulder.

"All right, old chap, I'm afraid we're cornered! Don't be a fool."

The quiet, calm warning in the voice probably saved Lawless's life. The tall aristocrat realised that when this friend of his, whose courage he had never had any chance to doubt, advised caution, it was well to obey.

Very reluctantly Lawless lifted his large, well-shaped hands level with his shoulders, and Blake did the same.

"Go across to the fireplace and stand there. Quick!"

Blake and Lawless dropped back and stood in front of the fireplace. Dimitri, white as a sheet, made an effort to rise to his feet, and the weapon swung an inch in the taut hand.

"Sit down, you cuh!" Doubroff barked. "I don't want to shoot, but, by gee, it would not take me much to drill a hole in you to clear my way!"

"You beast! You brute! I recognised you last night, you murderer!"

Olga, her dark eyes flashing, broke out into a swift torrent of Russian, and the sallow face of her cousin twisted into a malevolent smile.

"It was not my fault that last night's affair failed, Cousin Olga," he said. "Unfortunately I trusted to another man, and he made a mistake. That's why I have to visit you again. I want those papers."

"Never—never! You shall not have them!"

There was no denying the pluck of the girl. With a quick movement she snatched the papers up and pressed them against her breast, facing the evil figure courageously.

"You will give me those papers, my pretty cousin," Doubroff said, "and quickly, too!"

He began to move across the room sideways so that he faced Blake and Lawless and the brother. When he reached the table where Olga stood he stretched out his disengaged hand.

"Quick, the papers."

"I tell you you shall not have them. I defy you."

Doubroff shot out his hand and caught the girl by her shoulder, wrenching her aside.

"I'll give you two seconds," he said. "If you don't give me them, I fire—at your brother."

The automatic was levelled on the white-faced youth lying back in the chair.

"You hear me! The papers—quick! One—two——"

The long, lean fingers began to curve round the trigger, and there was death in his evil eyes. A sharp breath came from the girl's lips, and, with a quick, impulsive movement, she thrust her hands forward, with the crumpled papers in them.

"Take them—take them, you murderer!" she sobbed.

The large hand of Doubroff closed on the papers, and the girl staggered from the table and fell on the arm of the chair in which her brother sat, catching him round the neck.

"We're ruined—ruined, Dimitri!" she sobbed brokenly.

Doubroff, with a quick movement, stuffed the handful of papers into an inside pocket, then, with his eyes still fixed on the group in front of the fireplace, he leaned over the table and snatched the green box, feeling inside it.

The box was empty, and there were no loose papers on the table. A look of quiet satisfaction crossed the sallow, Slavonic face.

"I am going now, gentlemen," Doubroff said, relapsing into his Yankee drawl, "but before I go I'm going to give you a word of advice."

Here it was that Doubroff made his mistake, and again the quick Russian cunning gave way to that desire to boast, which is so characteristic of the lower-class American.

"I don't know if you are thinking of following me?" Doubroff drawled. "But I tell you that you have no chance. You take my advice, and let these two young fools go back to where they belong. They may have told you they escaped from Russia, but their escape was engineered by me, otherwise they would never have crossed the frontier!"

His loud, raucous voice filled the chamber and came to the ears of another individual, who was also vastly interested in Doubroff and his movements. Through the open window a stunted shape was lying across the sill, and the curtain had parted slightly, so that through the merest crack the watcher was able to see the dramatic scene in the interior.

"I have got a big power behind me," said Doubroff, the boaster, "and we have got a trick of getting rid of anybody who troubles us. For instance, it isn't so long ago, when I was in Moscow, that I saw one of your would-be clever guys go under."

A shiver seemed to run through the crouching shape, and a long, lean hand reached for something in an inner pocket.

Doubroff began to back towards the door, his weapon levelled.

"You get me?" he said. "You Englishmen are inclined to interfere too much, and when you get too hot you vanish, just the same as that fool, Adrian Steele——"

Crack!

A thin, whip-like report sounded from a very small revolver. A feather of blue smoke spat out from behind the curtain, and was wafted away through the open window, but the bullet sang across the room and went straight into Nicholas Doubroff's heart.

Almost before they realised what had happened, Blake and Lawless saw the tall figure reel, clutch at the wall, then very slowly and limply slide down it inch by inch, to crumple in a huddled heap on the floor.

"The window! Quick—the window! That's where it came from!"

Lawless made a headlong plunge for the heavy curtains.

Only a few seconds could have elapsed from the moment that the shot sounded till Lawless jerked the heavy velvet coverings aside. The

window was opened, and the faint glow from the street-lamp below shone through it, but there was no sign of Doubroff's slayer.

The broad ledge was empty, but as Lawless thrust his head out and listened, he fancied he heard the faint click of a window closing.

Doubroff had paid that grim penalty that all traitors have to pay at the hands of their merciless comrades! The Slav is a great plotter, but he is also a great believer in sudden and swift punishment.

Yermak, the bag-maker, was back again in Bunsell's Buildings ten minutes after he had completed his task, and that night a message was dispatched that only the initiated would understand. It was a single slip of paper bearing the name "Nicholas Donbroff," and through the name a red line had been drawn.

CHAPTER 4.

In Petrograd—Blake Makes a New Plan—In the Perasilin.

THE official was desolate! He said he was, in smooth French, and the shrug of his shoulders, and the appealing, almost pathetic light in his fine, black eye were inimitable. One might easily have imagined that this refusal hurt him a great deal more than it did the man who was interviewing him.

"You see, monsieur, Siberia is now so—terrible! Our poor country has suffered from the war, and travelling on the railway is an experience which only we poor Government officials must undergo. Now, were you going to some of the seaside resorts on the Black Sea, or even the Baltic, I should be charmed—delighted, to give you every facility."

The man in the sober grey tweed suit, who was seated on the other side of the desk, listened to this quiet speech carefully, and nodded his head.

"Then that settles it, I suppose?" he returned, in a quiet, drawling tone.

"I am afraid so, monsieur. I have, of course, done my best for you, but I cannot blame my superiors for forbidding you to travel to Tomsk."

He shrugged his shoulders, splaying out his hands.

"If there is any other place, monsieur, that you may want to visit, I shall be delighted to assist you."

Mr. Derk W. Sethers arose from his seat and picked up his soft felt hat.

"Very well, sir," he returned. "If it can't be done, it can't be done! I'll have to figure out a new programme, I guess."

The official touched a bell and a uniformed figure appeared, opening the door of the office, and two or three moments later the man in the grey, tweed suit was out on the broad pavement of the Nevski Prospect, and, turning to his right, he walked quietly along the busy thoroughfare.

The Nevski Prospect, to the people of Petrograd, is something like Regent Street is to the Londoner. It is there that one finds the best shops, and even under the Soviet rule there is no outward appearance, at least, of that famine peril, reports of which fill the European papers.

Sexton Blake—for it was he—had not been surprised at this blunt, if charming, refusal on the part of the officials.

He had arrived in Petrograd two days before, and, after spending a night in one of the hotels, had found furnished apartments on the Nevski Prospect, in one of the many blocks of flats there.

This much may be said for Petrograd: it is extremely difficult even for a stranger to lose his way in it. The tall spire of the Admiralty makes an excellent landmark, for the three principal thoroughfares of that sprawling city diverge from it

Petrograd, which is built over numberless islets formed by a network of canals which intersect the city, is never a healthy place in the summer-time.

From the Nevski Prospect three of the principal canals—the Moika, the Fontanka, and the Catherine, run at right angles, and from the rooms which Blake had engaged for himself and his companions a wonderful view of the city was to be had.

Even to-day, however, a touch of the East is

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distinctly to be found in this great capital, for, apart from the numerous churches that occupy so many sites on the Nevski Prospect, each street and alley has its trade, as one finds in Algiers, India, and China. There is the goldsmith, the silversmith, the jeweller, the worker in leather, and the scent-maker.

It was on the corner of one of these side streets that the house which Blake lived in was situated, and presently he passed into the arched doorway and climbed to the suite.

Lawless, his big figure garbed in a suit of sober black, and wearing the traditional tall collar of the type of manservant he was supposed to be, looked up as the detective entered.

"Nothing doing, I suppose?" he asked.

"No."

Blake removed his hat and placed it on a chair, then, crossing the room, he halted in front of the window.

"It is just what I expected, Lawless," he said. "We have had plenty of warning about it in any case! For some reason or other, the authorities here don't encourage tourists to go to Tomsk. I have been given the names of at least a hundred much more desirable towns, but Tomsk is taboo!"

Lawless scratched his chin, and a quiet smile crossed his face.

"That means, then, that we must go to Tomsk," he said, with a lift of his brows.

"Undoubtedly," Blake returned, "but what we have to settle now is our method of getting there."

As Blake spoke he was looking out of the window, and suddenly he drew back a pace, then beckoned to Lawless.

"Is that the man whom you referred to?" he asked.

Lawless came across to the window and glanced through the curtain. Lounging against the corner of the side-street was the figure of a Russian workman, in the typical blouse and wide trousers. He was smoking a cigarette, and, with his arms folded, seemed to be studying the traffic as it passed up and down the wider thoroughfare.

"Yes, that's the fellow," Lawless said, "and no doubt he's been following Tinker. Ah! There you are!"

Footfalls sounded, and a moment later the outer door of the suite opened, and Tinker came through the passage into the sitting-room.

Tinker was dressed in a light summer suit, and was carrying one or two parcels under his arm.

As the nephew of that well-off American citizen, Derk. W. Sethers, Tinker's appearance was in keeping with the part. His clothes and shoes and soft, round felt hat had the stamp of Broadway on them, and, indeed, as a matter of fact, it was from that aristocratic quarter that Tinker's kit had come. For, whatever Sexton Blake undertook he did thoroughly, and there had been moments in that long journey when he had smiled to himself as he watched the custom-house officials examining every scrap of his belongings.

From socks to collars, even to his studs, Blake had furnished himself with material of American manufacture. They had all been purchased in Paris, for that gay city has branches of most of the large American firms established there.

A word will explain Blake's method of reaching Petrograd, and his disguise. He had travelled to Paris under ordinary passports, and it was into a quiet hotel in the Rue Rivoli that Sexton Blake vanished, and out of it came Derk. W. Sethers, of Chicago, with passports, papers, accent, clothes complete!

Lawless's role of a sober English manservant was one that the tall man loved to play.

It has become the custom during this past quarter of a century for the better-class American to import into the United States the "Admirable Crichton" type of butler, and many menservants, trained in the old-fashioned English families, are now claiming enormous wages for their services to the Five Hundred in New York.

Lawless had developed a Cockney accent delicious to hear, and his studied indifference to the "h" had sent Tinker off into fits of silent laughter again and again.

It was typical of these three that they should play their parts in this grim adventure in their individual manner.

Blake was detached, earnest, alive to every move, and allowing no incident to escape his notice; Lawless, cheery, unruffled, saw the adventure as a mere episode, a welcome change from club boredom; while Tinker, the inveterate sightseer, made it just one long holiday.

"That beggar was after me, guv'nor," Tinker remarked, as he commenced to deposit his purchases on the table. "You are quite right, Lawless, he's a spy."

"What happened?" Lawless asked.

Tinker grinned.

"Oh, I think I puzzled him a bit," he said. "I have been all round the shops asking for Wriggley's chewing-gum, and 'a caused a wave of excitement in a cafe by asking for a raspberry syrup. You could have cut my accent with a knife, and I got more attention than a leading ballet-dancer, I believe."

Blake nodded towards the window.

"I don't think you quite satisfied our friend down there, nevertheless," he commented. "He is still on point-duty!"

He came back to the table and seated himself.

"Of course, there may be nothing in it," he said, "for it seems to me that the present Government in Russia carry out the same methods as the Tzar's police. There are very few people who can come in or out of Petrograd without being watched. I suppose that fellow is simply one of the police, picking up the various details that are demanded. In any case, Americans are rather popular here at the moment, and I don't think they really suspect we are anything else."

He took out his pipe and lighted it.

"I visited that house in the Sadovaya, near the Catherine Canal. It is a cheesemonger's

shop, and I left a message there. I am rather hoping that Roubaikoff may get in touch with us this evening."

"Have you a plan, Blake?"

"Yes, I have a plan," the detective returned, "but all depends on Roubaikoff, whether we can arrange it or not."

He nodded across to Lawless.

"My plan is rather a simple one," he said. "You are going to get black fever!"

"Eh! What?"

"You are going to develop a very severe attack of black fever, and that will mean isolation for all of us. If Roubaikoff can manage it we will be ordered to go to Finland, to Wiborg. It is about eighty miles from here, and it is considered to be the Russian Brighton. Once you are in Finland, of course, you are fairly safe, although we shall still be under the eye of the Government here."

"But what's the use of us going to Wiborg?" Lawless demanded. "Our goal is in exactly the opposite direction."

"Only one of us will go to Wiborg—and that is Tinker!"

Tinker had been in the act of drawing out from a parcel a remarkably appetising-looking cake, but, at his guvnor's words, the youngster dropped the cake and wheeled round.

"Going to leave me behind, guv'nor?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Hang it! That's a nice thing! What's the idea, anyhow?"

"This is what I want to arrange," said Blake. "If Roubaikoff can help us, we ought to carry it out without difficulty. As you know, Roubaikoff is a doctor, and so far has escaped any suspicion of being in the British pay. When he comes here to-night I want him to make a report that Lawless, here, is seriously ill with black fever, and that means isolation."

He smiled grimly.

"Roubaikoff will probably be permitted to take us away, and I'll get him to suggest that we are sent to Finland. As soon as we get to Wiborg, Roubaikoff ought to be able to produce two other men sufficiently resembling Lawless and me to pass muster as patients. My scheme is that a villa should be rented at Wiborg, and these two men take the place of Lawless and myself."

"Why can't you get another man and fix him up in my place?" Tinker said.

"It can't be done. We must have one of the trio showing themselves, and, as the job I have set aside for Lawless and myself is a pretty rotten one, I have made up my mind that you must wait behind."

He nodded towards his assistant.

"You will have to show yourself in Wiborg pretty frequently, and as long as the Russians see you are there they will think that the other two men are myself and Lawless."

"And how long will this be going on for?" Tinker demanded.

"Might be a week or a fortnight, but not longer than that."

"And what are we going to do in the interval, Blake?" Lawless remarked.

Blake's quiet smile warned Lawless that something out of the usual had been planned.

"You and I are going to Moscow," he said. "Our place of visit will be the great Forwarding Prison there. We'll probably travel under escort, Lawless, for I am taking a leaf out of Adrian Steele's book!"

The clean-cut jaw tightened.

"There seems to be only one way of getting to Tomsk, and that is by going there as a prisoner."

"Good heavens, old chap, are you really serious?"

"Absolutely. You will admit that Adrian Steele knew his Russia, and if he found it impossible to get to Tomsk by any other methods, I don't see why we should try to improve on his decision. Don't forget that his message plainly stated that he was a prisoner 'from choice.'"

"I don't like it, guv'nor," Tinker broke out. "It is bad enough for me to be left behind with a couple of confounded Russian dummies, but, by James, what you are going to do is a jolly sight worse, and, anyhow, I fail to see how you are going to arrange it!"

"That will be exceedingly easy, Tinker," said Blake. "Every week there is a batch of prisoners sent from Petrograd to Moscow, and it ought to be simple enough for Roubaikoff to arrange that we should take the places of two other men."

"I don't think for a moment that the prisoners themselves would find any objections!" Lawless said, "but to me it sounds like putting our heads into the lion's jaw."

Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose it is," he agreed, "but we can take very good care that the lion doesn't close his jaws!"

They discussed the plans for an hour or so, then Blake set about preparing the ground. His first anxiety was to get rid of the spy, who, with that quiet doggedness of the Slav, was still on guard at the opposite corner.

Tinker was sent out again with orders to keep the man busy for as long as possible, and in order to carry out that command thoroughly, Tinker crossed the Catherine Canal, and finally entered a cinema, where he spent a couple of hours watching fourth-rate films, most of which were of the propaganda type.

The man in the workman's blouse had seated himself close to Tinker, and, as they were emerging from the cinema, he happened to brush Tinker's arm. The youngster turned and spoke.

"Sorry," he said.

The police spy grinned, revealing a set of broken, tobacco-stained teeth.

"It is my fault, sir," he said, in fairly good English.

It was an opportunity that Tinker did not care to miss, and he began to talk to this enemy of his.

Tinker could always be relied upon to play a part well, and his easy, drawling speech carried conviction with it. He discussed Petrograd with the police spy, as though there were no such thing as informers in the world.

"This city of yours wants bucking up," he declared. "Everything is right away behind the times. Those films we saw tonight wouldn't be allowed in a tenth-rate show in my own country."

"Indeed, sir, but you forget that we Russians are poor, and cannot afford the latest and best."

Tinker babbled on, and the man seemed thoroughly interested in him, so by the time they reached the Catherine Canal again, Tinker felt pretty certain that his companion was assured now that it was a real American youth who was striding by his side; the opinions that Tinker expressed were both daring and exceedingly stupid, for it is not wise to criticise the Russian Government.

Tinker did so, however, knowing that this is the American method in a strange country, so that, when they reached the Nevski Prospect again, Tinker invited the informer to enter a cafe and have some coffee with him. The man refused, however, and they shook hands, then the figure in the workman's blouse hurried off, while Tinker turned into the entrance of the little flat that his guv'nor had taken.

Half way up the stairs Tinker looked out of the window. The street was lighted below, but he saw there was no sign of the spy now, and a grin of satisfaction crossed his keen, young face.

"I filled him up with bunk," Tinker thought to himself. "I'll bet he's off to headquarters now to unfold it. In any case we've got rid of the beggar, and that's the main thing."

He found Lawless sitting on the edge of his bed, and the tall aristocrat looked exceedingly uncomfortable. On the table by Lawless's side was a little, sealed packet, and he was studying a sheet of notepaper.

"What's on, Lawless? Where's the guv'nor?"

Lawless turned and looked at Tinker.

"Your guv'nor's gone off again with Roubaikoff. I have been waiting for you to come in. I want you to give me a hand with this stuff."

"What's the idea?" Tinker asked.

"I am going to get fever," said Lawless. "Of course, I trust Roubaikoff, but I don't like the idea of this at all."

He began to open the sealed packet, and revealed a tiny bottle and a small box of clear ointment.

"What have I to do?" Tinker demanded.

"I have to take the contents of this bottle first, then you have to rub my face and shoulders with this ointment," Lawless returned, "and Roubaikoff tells me that half an hour afterwards I'll break out into the most ghastly rash that ever followed a bad shave! The stuff in the bottle is supposed to raise my temperature away among the umpteen hundreds, and, when that happens, you've to wire frantically for a doctor."

Lawless rose to his feet, stretching his arms.

"I'm inclined to think that Blake deliberately picked me for the fever victim," he said, "and it is all through that confounded theory of his about the butting in process."

Tinker chuckled.

"We've all been having a share of that,

old man," he said. "Come along, get ready; I want to see what you look like with a real fever in hand."

Lawless stripped to his shirt, then the phial was drained, and Tinker started operations with the clear, colourless ointment. It was a skin irritant of some sort, and its effect was almost immediate.

On Lawless's face and shoulders there broke out a number of red, angry patches, and it was also obvious that the medicine he had taken had made a considerable difference to his temperature.

"If Roubaikoff hadn't told me that all this would pass away by to-morrow morning, I should say I had the worst attack of 'flu' that ever struck a man," the unfortunate victim of science groaned. "Go on, Tinker, get on to those doctors, for goodness' sake!"

Tinker hurried out of the flat and sought the proprietor of the establishment. The man came down, glanced at Lawless for a moment, then, with a horrified look on his face, dashed off again, and began to telephone, with the result that half an hour later a keen-looking medico from a near-by hospital appeared and examined the supposed manservant.

Roubaikoff's skill had not been wasted! The visiting doctor turned to Tinker with a shake of his head.

"This is a serious case, monsieur," he declared, in French. "It is either typhus or black fever. Have you a regular physician?"

"Of course; Dr. Roubaikoff," Tinker returned.

"Well, you had better send for him at once. Unfortunately, our hospitals are very crowded now, and we cannot take this servant of yours in, but I am inclined to think the authorities will advise his removal from Petrograd immediately, and it is more than probable that you, too, together with your uncle, may have to accompany him. We are very strict on quarantine regulations here. They are very necessary, for Petrograd is by no means a healthy city."

The doctor backed away to the door of the flat.

"I'll go and inform Dr. Roubaikoff, if you like?" he said. "He's not very far away from my hospital."

Tinker thanked the physician for his offer, and the dapper man hurried off, little dreaming that he was playing no small part in the grim game that Blake had developed in order to hoodwink the authorities.

Three-quarters of an hour later Roubaikoff, a massive, black-bearded man, returned to the flat accompanied by Blake and two attendants in long, linen cloaks.

A horse ambulance had halted outside the building, and its mere appearance there had caused something like a crowd to collect.

The farce of examining Lawless was gone through again, then the big fellow, wrapped in many blankets, was transferred to the stretcher, and carried downstairs.

"Come along, young 'un," said Blake. "Pack up. This is where we quit."

Tinker hurried into his own room and packed his few belongings. He found that his guv'nor had already nearly completed this task, and, when the lad emerged again with the valise, Blake and Roubaikoff were chatting together in the passage in quiet tones.

Roubaikoff turned and put his hand on Tinker's shoulder.

"I understand that you and I are going to be companions for the next few days," he said. "I can promise you a good time at Wiborg, although you may find yourself something of a prisoner."

They descended the stairs, and it was rather amusing to see the way that the crowd backed from them as they emerged through the doorway. They crossed and entered the hooded ambulance, and a policeman, who was standing by the driver, came and spoke to Roubaikoff for a moment, taking a pageful of notes.

The hooded ambulance started off at last, and, after a long drive through the dark streets, they found themselves rolling on through a stretch of quiet roadway that ran across the swampy plain which surrounds the capital.

Tinker, glancing out of the back of the ambulance, had a last vision of the low, sombre buildings, domes, and tapering spires of Petrograd glowing in the light, then a bend in the road hid it from view, and they bowled on towards Gatchina.

"We are not permitted to take infectious cases on board the train at Petrograd," Roubaikoff's voice declared. "I have made arrangements to catch the train at Gatchina."

A few versts along the road a halt was called at a low-roofed inn, and here the

second part of the grim comedy was enacted.

Two men emerged from the inn and entered the ambulance; five minutes later they reappeared in their rough peasant dress, and the ambulance moved off. The two figures, standing in the muddy roadway, watched the swaying vehicle until it had vanished, then the taller of the twain turned and put his hand on his companion's shoulder.

"Very neatly done, Blake," said the voice of Lawless; "but I hope this blinking rash and spots will have vanished before morning, otherwise I may be collared again by some enterprising doctor."

"Not much chance of that, old fellow," the detective returned. "By the time you have finished your walk to-night, there will be no trace of your fever or anything else left."

They headed back for Petrograd, and, as Blake prophesied, it was a long and arduous trudge over the marshy road. In all probability the sweat that Lawless now broke into cleared away any lingering effects of the drug, and, when they entered the dark capital, he felt himself again.

They spent the following day in a low-class lodging-house close to the station, and somewhere about two o'clock a greasy-looking fellow slipped a message into Blake's hand. It was from Roubaikoff, to say that they had arrived at Wiborg, and that all was well.

"I don't envy those two fellows who are taking our places, Blake," Lawless said. "Tinker will be a trying companion, despite the fact that Wiborg is a lively quarter, and he will have plenty of chance of amusing himself."

Late on the same afternoon, Blake and his companion caught the train for Moscow, travelling in a crowded compartment.

The journey of about four hundred and fifty miles took them the best part of a day, and it was getting late in the evening when they reached the old capital.

There is no comparison between Petrograd and Moscow, for, while the first is a mere imitation of other Continental cities, Moscow has a quaint, characteristically Eastern appearance which lends an air of mystery to it.

The great kremlin, which stands on the Moskwa, covering a triangle of ground nearly two miles in circumference, is in itself typical of the old-world city. There are five great gateways to the kremlin, and the principal one, called the "Spaski," is still ornamented by the golden Ikon, to which all passing under the arch used to uncover their heads.

Blake and Lawless climbed to the top of the Ivan Valiki, and saw at their feet Moscow, a conglomerate of white buildings, red roofs, green gardens; Moscow with its six hundred churches, their star-spangled domes and golden crosses flashing in the rays of the setting sun. Below them the River Moskwa, spanned by innumerable bridges, wandered lazily through the crowded streets and out into the broad, green plains beyond, to be lost in the blue haze of the distance.

Flocks of pigeons were to be seen flying hither and thither, for in Moscow the pigeon is a sacred bird.

It was almost sunset when the two friends found themselves walking down the Pont des Marecheaux, and the clamour of a thousand bells began to peal out on the evening air.

The Soviet has attempted to damp the religious fervour of the inhabitants of Moscow, but they have failed to do so, and each church and belfry sends forth its clamour, ranging from the clear musical tone of the smaller bells cast in pure silver, to the great, deep-throated boom of a fifty-ton bell, until the whole city seems to rock and sway under the solemn melody that pours over the darkening city.

Moscow, clean, well-paved, and well-lit, was a great difference from Petrograd, and Blake and Lawless, two shabby figures shuffling down the fashionable promenade, noted that most of the shops were closed and shuttered, the only sign that Moscow was suffering from the hand of the Soviet.

Finally they found themselves in a dreary-looking suburb of dirty, mean streets and sordid houses, which surrounded the Peresilni Forwarding Prison, a great, black building almost hidden by massive stone walls, which struck a menacing note among the meaner houses.

At each corner of the walls were tall, three-storeyed towers, with large, closely-barred windows looking out on to the road. Guarding each of these doors was an armed sentry standing in front of his grimy, black-and-white sentry-box.

And Lawless nodded significantly to

Blake as they passed the first of these structures.

"They haven't even troubled to change the style of paint, old chap," he whispered. "That was the sort of box they used in the Tsar's days."

They turned into a narrow, garbage-littered street at last, and Blake knocked on a low doorway. There was the scrape of a wooden bolt, and the wrinkled face of an old hag came round the corner to blink and stare at the two visitors for a moment.

Blake whispered something, and the woman moved aside, allowing the two friends to descend a couple of steps into a flagged passage, then went on down the narrow passage, and passed through a doorway guarded by a strip of ragged cloth. They found themselves in a low-ceilinged room, lighted by an open oil-lamp, the smoke from which had accumulated in a thick, pungent layer along the ceiling.

Four or five grimy fingers were visible through the haze, and, as Blake came to a halt, a man detached himself from the little knot and came across to him.

"You would like a game of chess, my friend?"

"Yes."

"This way."

They were led through the room into a smaller one, where on low tables chessboards had been placed, with piles of cushions on either side of them.

Lawless and Blake seated themselves at one table, and their guide sank into position opposite. From a box the man shook out a set of chessmen and began to arrange the pieces on the board.

Roubaikoff had told Blake of this particular method of communication, and each chessman and pawn represented a letter in the Russian alphabet.

Then began an extraordinary and, to Lawless, a new deaf-and-dumb method of communication. From piece to piece the grimy host moved his fingers rapidly, touching one, then another, and then another, spelling out each word, and Blake, slower at the game, replied in the same way.

Now and again the pieces would be moved as though playing the game, but it was the touching of the pieces which was the real secret in the method.

This proceeding lasted for the best part of half an hour, and by that time Lawless and Blake had had a full report from the man opposite them.

They were told that there was a batch of about a hundred prisoners in the Peresilni Prison at that moment, and they were to be dispatched to Nishni Novgorod on the following day.

"They go by the old route," the message was spelt out, "from Novgorod to Perm by steamer, then from Perm by railway again to Tieumen, then another river journey in the prisoner-barges to Tomsk."

Little by little the plan was revealed, and at the end of it, Lawless turned a woe-begone face to Blake.

"Got to get in there to-night?" he said.

"So it appears," Blake returned. "They are not giving us much rest; but still, it is all the better for that."

With a sweep of his hand their host scattered the pieces, arose to his feet, and clapped his hands, and a moment later, when the old hag came in, he ordered food.

"You will eat, my friends," he said. "It may be late to-morrow before you get any other food. You will be ready for us at midnight."

There was something dramatic about that last meal which Blake and Lawless shared in the dingy house. They knew that in a few hours they would find themselves prisoners in the hands of the Soviet; part of a gang waiting in the great, lonely prison to be sent forward to Siberia, herded with the riff-raff of the world.

Yet it was characteristic of both men that they made a good meal; Lawless, in particular, taking his food with a quiet zest that made the private detective smile quietly to himself.

Somewhere about midnight their host appeared again, carrying with him a couple of bundles, and they were told to change. The clothes handed to them were of rough, grey material, loose-fitting trousers and workmen's blouses. They were also given thick grey cloaks, which reached to the knees.

When they had completed dressing, their host signalled to them, and they followed him out through another exit, and, after pacing on down a dingy street, found themselves under the high stone walls of the prison.

They could just see the door at the

corner, with its armed sentry standing outside his box, and, bidding them wait there, their guide slid on aloug the wall, and they saw him come to a halt behind the sentry-box; then the sentry turned his head, and through the velvety darkness there came the sound of voices whispering.

The sentry turned and walked off past the gateway that was guarded by his tower, and, when his footfalls had ceased to sound, their guide sent a low whistle through the darkness.

"Quick, my friends!"

Lawless and Blake stumbled forward, and, as they passed the sentry-box, they saw their guide standing beside the iron gateway, and the chink of keys sounded.

"Go straight across and into the first doorway," their guide whispered. "You will find your friends waiting there. Quick!"

He gave Lawless a slight thrust, and next moment the tall aristocrat and his friends were inside the walls of the prison. They started off at a run over the rough ground, heading for the prison building, and reached the doorway. As they came to a halt for a moment, a hand stretched out and caught Blake by the shoulders; then a voice spoke to him in Russian:

"We are here, waiting. Quick!"

Blake and Lawless found themselves inside a dark passage, and they began to move along it, following the two indistinct figures.

A low murmuring of voices became louder and louder, indicating they were nearing some chamber in which men were confined. But while they had still some ten or twenty yards to go, a door hanged on the left, the two figures who were leading came to a halt, and Blake hoard one of them draw his breath quickly—a sharp, sibilant sound.

The clatter of a sword rattling against the wall came to their ears, and a pin-point of light appeared. It grew larger, and Blake saw it was a lantern held by an armed man, who was pacing slowly down the passage, followed hy another individual.

Blake heard the jangle of a bunch of keys, and a whisper from his guide warned him who it was.

"The warder! He is coming to inspect our camera (public cell)."

In the wall of the passage to the left was a huge doorway, with an iron grill, and the four furtive figures darted for it, pressing themselves flat again the wooden harrier.

The steady tramp of feet, drawing nearer and nearer, was the only sound that broke the silence. Then Lawless turned his head and nodded to Blake.

"We had hetter take charge of this," he said, a grim flash of humour in his voice. "I have never had to break into prison before, but it's got to he done."

Lawless slipped his hand into his pocket, and his fingers came in contact with a square, metal box, a box in which he carried his precious tobacco.

Gripping the missile, Lawless awaited his opportunity, and, when the armed sentry with the lantern reached to within a yard of the deeply recessed doorway, Lawless flung the metal box full at the lighted lamp.

It smashed the glass, and, as the shattered fragments fell with a tinkling sound on the stone-paved passage, Lawless and Blake leapt on the two uniformed figures.

Lawless's fist was driven full into the sentry's face, and the man went reeling against the wall with a half-choked oath. At the same moment Blake closed with the dapper figure of the warder officer, and the detective's hand closed over the fellow's mouth, checking the cry that would have risen.

With a quick, deft movement of his hand, Blake tripped his opponent up, and the small figure went flat on its back on the hard floor, the sword rattling as he fell. The officer's head came in contact with the stone floor, and Blake felt him go limp under his fingers.

"All right! Quick! Where do we go?"

He leapt to his feet just as Lawless swung himself clear from the sentry, whom he had tackled again and had sent crashing to the floor.

The taller of the two men who had met them, pointed up through the dimly lit passage.

"There, on the right—the second door!"

Lawless and Blake bolted for all they were worth up the passage, and, reaching the door, dropped hack the bolt and leapt inside, slamming the door behind them.

They found themselves in a long chamber with high, barred windows on either side. The door itself was open ironwork, through which a current of air drove from the passage. The room was crowded, and was half-filled with tobacco smoke.

Down the middle of the room ran a broad, wooden platform, sloping both ways from the centre. On this the huddled figures of the sleeping prisoners, each on his narrow mattress, could be seen indistinctly through the haze of smoke. On the walls were narrow platforms, on which were stacked clothes, provisions, books, etc.

A stunted figure came hurrying to Blake and Lawless, and beckoned to them.

"Quick, messieurs!" he said. "This way!"

They were led down the reeking room to the far corner, and their guide pointed to two empty spaces on the sleeping platform.

"There are your quarters, messieurs," he said, "and remember your names. You are Givonoff"—he nodded to Lawless—"and you, monsieur, are Noblesk."

He vanished into the darkness, and, as he did so, a clamorous noise sounded from the doorway, and an angry official voice sounded.

"Quick, old chap—under cover!"

Lawless flung himself on the mattress nearest to him, and Blake followed suit. Next moment they were wrapt in their blankets, pretending to be sound asleep.

From under one corner of his blanket, Lawless watched the scene at the other end of the long chamber. A couple of armed sentries, together with a flushed, angry-looking officer, had entered, and it was the latter's voice which had rapped out his curt orders.

Another individual came through the doorway, evidently an officer of superior rank, for he spoke to the younger man for a moment. Then, placing the armed sentries on duty at the door, he began to move down the room.

By this time the occupants of the room had arraigned themselves on their mattresses, and, with long strides, the chief officer came clumping down the chamber, numbering the recumbent figures as he passed. At his heels came the youngor officer, and Lawless smiled grimly to himself as he noted the ruffled, agitated face.

The little procession passed Blake and Lawless, and went on round the edge of the sloping platform, and on down the other side.

Lawless heard the deep voice of the officer counting the numbers:

"Fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty."

The count went on until at the far end of the room the number reached ninety-four, and the speaker came to a halt, raising his voice.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, turning to the younger officer. "They are all here! What fool story is this that you tell us that two have escaped?"

Heads and shoulders began to lift from the mattresses, and one by one the prisoners commenced to slip from their places until a group of them had gathered round the officers and the escort.

"What do you fellows say to this?" the tall man observed, turning to the grey-clad figures. "Is there anyone who has not away from this room?"

"Oh, no, little father! No, no, little father!"

The deep-voiced response made the younger officer's face go dark with anger.

"But I tell you it is true!" he broke out, turning to his superior. "We were in the passage, there, when these men sprang at us. There were two of them, and they got away. There is no other room occupied here, and they must have come from this place."

"There are ninety-four men supposed to be here, and that number is here," the superior officer returned. "Stand aside!"

He swept the younger officer away, strode towards the iron doorway, and the armed man standing there swung it open.

"Come," the officer cried, beckoning to the younger man and the other escort. "You have been mistaken. There is no need to disturb these men's sleep. To-morrow they make an early start. Let them rest. Come along!"

Muttering his protests, the younger officer followed at the heels of his superior, and the two armed escorts disappeared into the passage, draggiug the door behind them with a clang.

A buzz of voices arose in the room; then the individual who first approached Blake, appeared again and signalled to him and Lawless. They seated themselves on the edge of the platform, and in a low voice the man held a quiet conversation with them for a few moments.

"We are starting to-morrow at an early hour," he said. "Your kits are over there. You will find them all complete."

His eyes travelled from Blake to Lawless, and then back again.

"It is not for me to inquire what you are going to do," he said, "but it is a hard way that lies before you, and a bitter journey. Wait until you get upon the prison barge at Tomsk."

His lips lifted in a grim laugh.

"The outside world doesn't know that convicts are being treated now just as they used to be in the bad days of thirty years ago. They don't allow us to be seen on the railways that are used by European travellers. Oh, no, they send us by the older route—by the smaller lines! The train runs from Petrograd to Tomsk, but they don't permit us to be seen on it. We go by river—miles and miles of river, penned up like cattle. You will see—you will see!"

And his thin, broken accents seemed to Lawless to be laden with a grim, menacing note.

"In cages, like wild animals. That is how we'll travel to Tomsk," the low voice added.

CHAPTER 5.

Yermak Smells a Rat—The Villa in the Woods—Tinker Goes to Petrograd—Following the Trail.

ON the wide landing-stage of Wiborg, Tinker was sunning himself on one of the many wooden benches. He was quite satisfied with Wiborg, and, indeed, that beautiful little town on the top of the Gulf of Finland is in many ways an ideal holiday resort.

Although it is only eighty miles away from Petrograd, it bears no stamp of the heavy hand of Russia on it, and at that season of the year, Wiborg was filled with visitors from Helsingfors and the other Finland cities.

A week had passed, and Tinker had got fed-up with the enforced inactivity.

The little villa that Roubaikoff had taken him to was situated in a forest about half a mile from Wiborg, on the edge of a huge, inland lake, and, so far as Tinker was concerned, the villa was a very safe stronghold.

Special servants had been engaged, and the villa itself was isolated, for the dread of typhus was quite sufficient to keep any ordinary person at arm's length.

Roubaikoff had returned to Petrograd two or three days ago, and it was after his departure that Tinker found his time hanging heavily on his hands. The two men, who had been chosen to represent Blake and Lawless, were stolid, unimaginative fellows, who seemed to be quite content to spend the whole of their time in their rooms at the top of the villa.

Food was brought to them from Wiborg and left at the gates of the villa, where it was received by one of the white-clad attendants, who had been brought by Roubaikoff.

There had been no other visitors there; nor, indeed, was that surprising, for Roubaikoff had been very careful to spread the news about that it was the dread typhus fever that his patients suffered from.

Unfortunately for Tinker, the other two inmates of the house were unable to speak a word of English, and to a young, vigorous lad the confinement began to grow very irksome. So it came about that at the end of the week Tinker got fed-up at his position, and took a chance one morning, slipping out of the villa before it was dawn, after warning the attendants of his intentions.

A walk along the lake side did him a power of good, and finally he found himself in Wiborg, where he had a meal at one of the restaurants, and landed at last on the pleasant promenade. From here he could have a view of the shipping and the busy, bustling wharfs and landing-stages, from whence the paddle-steamers and small craft carried their loads of pleasure-seekers up and down the Gulf.

The sun was warm, and Tinker felt very satisfied as he lounged on a bench.

A small steamer came alongside the landing-stage and deposited its passengers. Tinker watched them idly as they came up towards him. They were the usual assortment of pleasure-seekers, well-dressed, fair-haired, and blue-eyed; of the real Finnish type. Then presently his attention was directed to a man very dissimilar from the others, a wizened, hobbling shape dressed in sober brown, carrying a small valise.

This man came past the seat where Tinker was lounging, and the face, with its crop of bushy whiskers, almost monkey-like in its grotesqueness, was turned towards Tinker for a moment.

Yermak, the bag-maker, gave no sign

that he recognised that lounging figure; the small, yellow-rimmed eyes did not even flicker. He passed on, and finally seated himself on a bench lower down; then, tucking his valise under the seat, and twisting his thin legs round it, Yermak proceeded to light a pipe, his knuckly fingers fumbling with the tobacco-pouch and bowl.

There was something wrong here, Yermak told himself.

Yermak never forgot a face, and he remembered that clean-cut, freckled countenance. He had only seen it for a moment, when it had appeared on the platform at Euston, when Olga and Dimitri Azmerieff were being seen off on the train for Liverpool, by Blake, and Lawless, and Tinker; but, brief though that moment had been, it had served its purpose, and Yermak knew that this slim young fellow sunning himself on the warm bench, was one of a trio, whose movements were his immediate interest.

Yermak had made inquiries concerning Blake and Lawless, but had not discovered that they had gone to Paris until two days after that event had taken place. An associate of his in the gay city had been asked to make inquiries, but had failed to find any traces of the English detective and his companions.

Blake had covered his tracks very well, but he had not reckoned on Yermak's knowledge of what had happened. The bag-maker, foiled in his effort to locate Blake in Paris, had come to a very obvious decision.

If Blake were out to try and locate Adrian Steele, and knew anything at all about that individual's fate, there were only two places he would head for—Petrograd or Moscow!

Yermak decided that the capital was his best place to make for then, and he travelled by a route of his own, by way of the Baltic to Helsingfors, thence down to Wiborg, from which place it would be easy enough for him to reach Petrograd.

A man like Yermak doesn't care to cross the Continent, where frontiers exist and Custom House officials often combine their work with Secret Service work; for there were many reasons why Yermak did not care to touch France or Germany. Hence he chose the sea route, a longer journey, but safer; and now, within the last stage of Petrograd, fortune had favoured him in a most amazing way, for there, twenty yards away from him, lounged one of the trio who had evaded him so cleverly.

It was sheer chance that had sent Yermak to Wiborg, but he was fully prepared to take every advantage of the turn that fortune had favoured him with. Yet he was careful; he knew quite well that there would be no possible chance of his making use of his usual methods in Wiborg. The Finnish authorities and the people of Finland hate the Russians, root and branch, nor will they permit of any interference of their laws by Petrograd.

Whatever Yermak did would have to be done quietly and entirely off his own bat.

Unfortunately for Tinker, he had no idea of the identity of the wizened, harmless-looking old fellow who had shuffled past him with the dingy valise. Yermak's type can be met in every town in that part of the world; furtive, slinking shapes, harmless to all appearances; old workmen, dwarfed and stunted by years of laborious toil.

And so finally, when Tinker, having thoroughly enjoyed his day's outing, made his way back to the villa on the edge of the lake, although he took certain precautions and kept an eye open for possible spies, it never occurred to him that the warped figure whom he saw once, when he left the town, could be placed in that category.

The fact that it was dusk also favoured Yermak. The roadway for the most part ran through woods, and Yermak, keeping to the trees, was able to follow the lad without being seen. And, when Tinker vanished into the lovely villa, Yermak emerged from the trees on the other side of the road and took stock of the place.

An hour later he was back in Wiborg, and, entering a café there, he exchanged a signal with the proprietor which made that individual follow the twisted shape into an inner room, where Yermak began to ply the man with questions.

He did not receive satisfactory replies to all his queries, but the café proprietor went off, and somewhere about midnight Yermak was furnished with a full and complete report of the inmates of the villa on the edge of the lake.

The Russian Government find it necessary to keep two or three spies at Wiborg, for it is one of the outlets to Russia, and the

thoroughness of their organisation was proved by the report that Yermak received.

"There is a trick," he said to his informant. "I don't believe that all these Englishmen are in this villa. They are not the sort of people to idle their time away. There is a trick, I tell you, and we must find out what it is."

He sat huddled in his chair, drumming on the table in front of him with his long, lean fingers.

"No doctor has been to them since they came here, eh? Is that so?"

"So we believe. They are being looked after by their own attendants."

"Very well; that gives me an idea. I want two men to come here to-morrow morning very early. We shall require a conveyance."

He leaned forward and spoke for a few moments to the café proprietor, who nodded his head at the end.

"It shall be done, barin," the man promised.

As luck would have it, next morning, when the conveyance from Wiborg halted at the villa, Tinker had gone for an early morning stroll along the banks of the wooded lake.

Yermak's confederates played their parts well enough, and the one whom he had chosen to act as a town official with authority to inspect the patients carried out his duties in the true, brusque, official manner, with the result that the attendants were first of all flung into a state of panic. While one of them held the visitors for a moment below the stairs, the other darted off up to the room where the two supposed patients were, and warned them of what was happening.

Yermak was seated in the front seat of the vehicle, and was playing the part of driver, but his keen, ferret eyes allowed very little to escape their notice, and it was he who first caught sight of the alarmed face of a man peering out of a window on the first floor.

When his two confederates had disappeared into the villa, Yermak slid from his seat, darted across the strip of garden, and, reaching the verandah, shinned up one of the posts, scrambled along the sloping roof, and gained the window where he had seen the startled visage loom for a moment.

Raising his head cautiously, the Cossack peered into the room, and was just in time to see the tall man, playing Lawless's part, scramble into the bed and tuck the sheets up round his chin.

By the time that the two supposed officials had gained the room both "patients" were in their beds, and a formidable display of medicine bottles, etc., and the reek of powerful drugs were quite sufficient to impress the average lay mind.

One of the two visitors ventured across to the bed on the left, and looked at the mottled skin of the individual lying in it.

Roubaikoff, in his usual thorough way, had made sure that at least the men left behind would look as though they had the remnants of that dread disease, and Yermak's accomplice backed away from the bed at once.

When the two men emerged from the villa, Yermak was back in his seat in the chaise, and, followed by the white-coated attendants, they came down the path and climbed into the vehicle, rapping out an order to Yermak, who promptly turned the two sturdy ponies and started off back to Wiborg.

When Tinker returned half an hour later, he was told about the visit, but was assured that all was well. Indeed, so far as Yermak's accomplices were concerned, they fell into the trap easily enough, but the grim smile with which the bag-maker listened to their account of the scene indicated his true thoughts.

That same afternoon Yermak left for Petrograd!

It is not necessary to follow all his movements in that city of intrigue, but, late on the following afternoon, a letter arrived at the villa at Wiborg which made Tinker rub his hands with delight.

It was from Roubaikoff's address, and, so far as Tinker knew, was in the doctor's handwriting. Indeed, it was such a clever forgery that he was not to blame for falling into the trap.

"I have received a communication from your friends. I must see you at once. Come to Petrograd and call here. Do not arrive until night, for otherwise it is not safe."

Had Tinker had the least glimmering of the truth, he would not have walked into that net so easily; but he had had no news of his master and Lawless for so long, and had become very anxious about

them, that it seemed to him that this message was genuine enough. Roubaikoff was the link between him and them, and he had been expecting some sort of communication from the doctor. So, without explaining what he was going to do to the attendants at the villa, Tinker packed a small valise, and that same evening caught the train for Petrograd.

It happened to be one of the expresses that did the journey inside three or four hours, and evening found him in the capital again.

Roubaikoff's house was situated in one of the wider streets that converge to the railway station, and Tinker turned into it somewhere about seven o'clock.

The street was badly lighted, and, save for the vehicular traffic running to and from the station, was practically deserted.

Roubaikoff's house was on a corner, and, as Tinker reached the corner opposite, an incident occurred that brought him to a halt.

Yermak had not calculated on Tinker responding so quickly to his message, otherwise that uniformed figure would not have appeared in the door of Roubaikoff's house. It was a police official, one of the men who had examined Blake's passports when he had first arrived in the city. The sight of that individual strolling out of the doorway made Tinker draw back, and the first suspicion came into the lad's brain.

He found a dark doorway, and, standing there, watched the house. A long five minutes passed; then, in one of the lighted windows of the first floor, where Roubaikoff's consulting-room was situated, Tinker caught sight of a figure. It was Yermak; the wiry Cossack had drawn aside the curtain, and was peering down into the dark street. Tinker had a full view of the bearded face and the small eyes.

"Where the deuce have I seen that monkey physog before?" he muttered to himself.

There was a balcony beside the window, which was of the French type, and presently Yermak appeared on the balcony, standing there for a long minute, while he looked up and down the deserted street; then at last another individual appeared in the lighted window behind, and Yermak, turning, spoke to the newcomer.

It was only when he turned his head that something familiar about the wizened shape came to Tinker. He remembered seeing that grotesque, shuffling figure as it had seated itself on the bench.

"By James, a spy, eh? I wonder if he's Roubaikoff's friend or enemy?"

It was a pretty problem for Tinker to solve! Roubaikoff, he knew, had numberless acquaintances, who were part of that network of intrigue which seems to flourish wherever a few Slavs are gathered together.

Cautious enough now, Tinker held his post in that dark doorway until another move came from the inmates of the house; a second figure emerged from the doorway, glancing up and down the wide street.

Tinker had caught sight of the newcomer, a youth dressed in rough workman clothes. He turned in the direction of the station, and, after a moment's hesitation, Tinker followed him, finding himself at last inside the roomy station, where his quarry halted in the refreshment-room, and had a cup of tea from a great, brass samovar.

Tinker went up to the long counter and ordered similar refreshment. A few minutes passed, then another individual entered the refreshment-room, and crossed to where the youth in the workman's blouse was standing.

To Tinker's satisfaction, they began to speak to each other in French, a language of which Tinker had a sound knowledge.

He had recognised the other man as being the police official who had first left Roubaikoff's house, and, in the conversation which ensued, Tinker soon discovered the truth.

Roubaikoff had been collared! Someone had betrayed him, and he was now in the hands of the police, while at his house other Secret Service agents were waiting to spring a trap.

"He has not come yet," the youth said. "There is another train at ten o'clock; perhaps he will arrive by it. What of the other two?"

"We have not been able to trace them," came the reply. "All we know is that they went to Moscow, but after that we find no thread; but Yermak swears they are going to Tomsk. They want to trace that English newspaper man, and, if they do so, they may also discover about the—the other!"

"What about Roubaikoff? Could not he tell you?"

"No, we questioned him; but I think he was speaking the truth when he said he had no idea what their plans were. All he knows is that they were three Englishmen, who were here on a special mission."

The police official clenched his fist.

"We must get this lad," he went on. "I hope that Yermak's letter has not failed to draw him!"

It certainly had not failed to draw him, although he little dreamed that the youth he was in search of was seated on a hard bench not nine paces from him.

The refreshment-room was fairly well crowded with all sorts and conditions of men, and, as neither the police official nor the young fellow with him had ever set eyes on Tinker, they were not to be blamed for failing to recognise him!

"You know what you have to do, Alexis?" the police official went on. "I have another message to give you, and you must hand it to Galtine when you get to Tomsk. You have your papers, but you will not need to show them. I have explained that you will be travelling by that train, and they will let you through without question."

Tinker saw the youth in the workman's blouse slip his hand into his garment and draw out a small pocket-book, held together by a rubber band. Undoing the band, he produced four or five papers, and unfolded them, handing them one by one to his companion.

"These are sufficient, I suppose?" he said.

The police official looked at them casually; then, folding them, returned them to their owner.

"Yes, they are all that you require. Should you be questioned—— But as they know you, Alexis, I don't suppose they will interfere."

He in his turn drew an envelope from his pocket, and gave it to his younger companion.

"That you will deliver to Galtine," he said. "Don't forget he is to be found near the Goubernski Prison. There is a little inn on the road, and it is there that Galtine lives. You will remember the name—it is called the Obi."

The youth nodded as he added the envelope to the pile of documents in his notebook; then the rubber band was replaced, and he slipped the bulky pocket-book into his blouse.

A few moments later the clamour of a bell began, heralding the approaching departure of a train, and Tinker, emerging from the refreshment-room, followed the tide of people, and discovered that it was the Siberian night mail which was about to leave.

As he crossed the platform a bearded, burly man, walking ahead of him, dropped something from the coat that he was carrying over his arm, and Tinker stooped to pick it up.

It was a pocket-book, very similar to that which he had seen in the youth's fingers, the same rubber band and dark covering.

In a country where one can hardly move a hundred yards without producing passports, etc., it is customary to have a pocket-book of this kind in which to carry documents, and, as Tinker's fingers closed over this treasure-trove, an amazing scheme came into his mind. It was typical of his cool-headed resourcefulness, and, above all, it gave him the necessary excuse for trying to link hands again with his guv'nor.

After all, Roubaikoff had been caught, and the authorities were aware of the trick which Lawless and Blake had played on them. Tinker felt, therefore, that it was up to him to try and get in touch with these two, and warn them of their danger.

The man who had dropped his pocket-book trudged on, unconscious of his loss, and Tinker, vanishing into the crowd, retraced his steps, and finally caught sight of the youth in the loose blouse again.

There was now a jam of people outside the barrier, where two police officials and railway employees were carefully examining each passenger as they passed through the gap in the barrier on to the platform.

Presently Tinker managed to sidle up to the youth as they were swept forward into the mass of people.

The station at Petrograd is not very well lighted, and, when the crowding passengers had wedged Tinker and his quarry in their midst, Blake's young assistant completed his grim trick.

A sway of the crowd helped him, and, urged by them, he barged against the slim youth, who was much the same height and age. As he fell against his unsuspecting

victim, Tinker's deft fingers were busy. They slid into the loose folds of that workman's blouse, and emerged again with the precious pocket-book; at the same time, the other pocket-book that he had picked up, was put in its place.

With Alexis's pocket-book tucked in his sleeve, Tinker made play with his elbows, and managed to drive himself deeper into the throng, putting three or four yards between him and his victim.

He was carried on up to the barrier, and finally found himself standing between two police officials.

He whipped out Alexis's pocket-book, and, slipping the rubber catch, he presented the papers to the man on his right—a railway official, as it happened. The documents, which also contained a railway ticket, were carefully inspected, and returned to Tinker, and he found himself free to walk up the platform and take his seat in the train.

A thrill ran through him as he realised that he was on the verge of another great adventure; then he found a seat and settled himself in a corner, where he could watch the tide of passengers.

The comedy of the barrier was played out under his eyes. First came the man who had lost the pocket-book; and Tinker felt sorry for the fellow as, after a search, he discovered his loss and began to wail out a string of protest—protest which was cut short by one of the police officials, who gripped him by the shoulder and jerked him aside.

There was one man who would not travel to Tomsk that night.

Another trickle of passengers came through the gap, then Tinker saw Alexis. This was the crucial moment, for it all depended on whether the Secret Service agent would be forced to show his papers or not; but, as Alexis stepped into the gap, one of the police officials on duty looked at him, then put up his hand and made a gesture.

Alexis, who had commenced to fumble in his loose blouse, grinned, and passed through the barrier unmolested.

Tinker dropped back in his seat with a grunt of relief.

"That's all right," he told himself; "there are two of us travelling with this ticket and I am safe so far!"

Alexis came on past Tinker's compartment, and the youngster noted that he entered the next carriage. Blake's assistant was glad then that he had brought his valise with him, for he knew that it was a long journey that lay before him.

Three other passengers entered Tinker's compartment and settled themselves; then, at long last, the train drew out from the station, and the journey began—a journey close on three thousand miles through the heart of hidden Russia.

"I wonder what the deuce the guv'nor will say to me when we meet at Tomsk?" Tinker said to himself.

The mere fact that he was quite convinced that they would meet at Tomsk, spoke volumes for his immense self-assurance!

CHAPTER 6.

Adrian Steele—The Prison Barge—An Attack on the Kremlin.

ABOUT two miles above Tomsk, where the River Obi takes a sharp bend, leaving behind it a great mud bank, there stands a lonely fortress, the tall walls of which are lapped by the waters of the river. It is one of the oldest kremlins in Siberia, and tradition has it that it was once used by the great Cossack adventurer, Timofeef, who, with a mere handful of men, conquered that vast territory and handed it over to the Tsar, late in the fifteenth century.

The lonely kremlin on the banks of the Ohi had not been used for a generation, but there were now many indications of life and activity in the massive structure.

On the high walls that flanked the river, armed sentries paced to and fro, and the gateway of the kremlin, which opened on to the muddy road, was guarded by other armed figures.

Early one morning, a procession of rude carts went out of Tomsk, and followed the rough track that led to the kremlin. Striding beside each cart was an armed warder, and on each vehicle two grey-clad figures from the Goubernski were seated.

The carts were piled with building material, and, when they reached the end of their journey and came to a halt at the

gateway of the kremlin, they were wheeled to the right and parked. Then the convicts commenced to unload the stuff, and presently, under the orders of an officer who had emerged from the kremlin, they were marched in single file through the gloomy gateway and along an echoing passage, to finally emerge into a paved space behind the high walls.

Here they were set to work to repair the masonry in one side of the wall, where Time's fingers had been at work.

Most of the convicts were stunted, hollow-eyed individuals, who carried out their tasks in surly silence; but one of them stood out from his companions by reason of his height and general appearance. He was tall, very thin, and there was the stamp of hunger on his tanned face. A shock of red, matted hair and straggling beard of the same colour, gave him a savage appearance, and the strong, hawk nose and steel-blue eyes were sufficient to mark him out from the company of ordinary men.

He was dressed like the others in the drab garb, and his thin jacket, opened at the neck, revealed a strong throat and deep chest.

An armed warder, leaning on his long rifle, watched the group at work; then presently a gong sounded, and the warder barked out a brief command. The gang ceased toil, and, forming again into a line, went on across the narrow space and entered a low-roofed apartment, from the windows of which they had a view of the river. Here food was provided for them, and it was plentiful enough, although coarse.

The tall, red-haired man took bowl and plate, and, crossing to one of the windows, seated himself under it, and began to munch at his food.

Presently another of the convicts joined him, and a low conversation took place.

"And you think your friends ought to be here to-day?"

"Yes; the prison-barge is due at Tomsk this afternoon, and it must pass here first."

The man who had joined the other shrugged his thin shoulders.

"Well, I wish you luck, my friend," he returned; "but it is not easy to turn 'cuckoo' nowadays."

The tall man smiled.

"It is long since I heard that term used, Ivan," he returned. "That dates back from the bad old Siberian exile times."

"Yes, but they could not have been worse than now," the other returned.

Adrian Steele looked away, with a smile on his bearded lips.

He knew what the other referred to, for, in the old days, when the Siberian prisoners made an attempt to escape, they always chose the summer—cuckoo time—when there was a chance of their getting away to the vast forests and hiding there, living like wild beasts on the berries and roots until chance carried them over the frontiers.

"A cuckoo, eh?" Steele thought to himself, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Not a bad name either; for, by James, I have been a cuckoo all right! I wonder if these other fellows feel like cuckoos in that cage of theirs?"

Just how Roubaikoff managed to convey that message to Tomsk, which reached Adrian Steele, that two other Englishmen, mad-brained as himself, were following him to Tomsk, had better not be explained. It must suffice to say that Adrian Steele did receive the news, which had been complete to the last detail, and so, when a work-gang had been called for from the prisoners of the Gourbernski to labour at the kremlin, the red-haired journalist-adventurer had been the first to volunteer.

Time hangs heavy in the hands of Russian prisoners. There is no set type of work that they can perform, and long hours of idleness become a terrific penance. There is never wanting a volunteer for any work that may be called for.

But Adrian Steele had another reason for desiring to visit that lonely kremlin, a reason that will be presently revealed.

A slight haze had fallen over the river, and the low mud-flats and the dreary vista of plains made a gloomy picture from the narrow window; but presently from the distance there came the shrill hoot of a steamer, and, later on, Adrian Steele caught the steady beat of paddle-wheels.

An order from the escort brought the prisoners into rank again, and they were marched back to their task; but, as Steele worked at the crumbling wall, his ears were on the alert, and, when the powerful paddle-steamer with the prison-barge in tow, rounded the bend and came on down

the reach in front of the kremlin, Steele managed to slip away for a moment, and, gaining a corner of the wall, looked out across the river again.

The paddle-steamer was just rounding one of the great mud-flats, and, as Steele watched, he saw the nose of the paddle-boat lurch suddenly. A great froth of brown, muddy water came splashing up from the paddles, then the barge, lumbering onward on the end of the loosened tow-rope, smote the steamer in the stern, thrusting it further on to the mud-bank.

A torrent of yells and deep-throated shouts came across the river, and Steele saw the screw of the paddle-steamer running to and fro; finally there came the clattering of an anchor as it dropped, and, with a quiet grin, the tall man swung round and lowered himself into the paved court again.

"I call that Providence," he said to himself. "Not much chance of them getting that steamer afloat for the next few hours. I'll take full advantage of the chance."

He returned to his work, and what followed then was, in its way, a proof of the quick fertility of that clever brain.

One of the convicts, swinging a single-pronged pick, raised the tool for another full swing just as Adrian Steele came staggering forward with a load of stones. The whole trick was adroitly accomplished, and only Steele himself knew that it was the mere end of the pick that he received as he dropped into a heap behind the amazed pick-wielder.

There was a shout from the rest of the convicts, and the armed warder came rushing forward just as Steele dragged himself to his feet, with one hand to his head, swaying slightly.

A torrent of words from the spectators told the escort what had happened, and Steele, withdrawing his hand, revealed a patch of red under it.

A piece of flint, judiciously applied, had made the graze, and the rest was merely clever acting.

"I'll be all right," Steele said, half-closing his eyes. "Let me go back with one of the carts now."

Two fellow-convicts came on either side of him, and he was led away across the paved court, and out through the gateway.

The string of carts were drawn up by the roadside, and the escort marched Steele down along the row to the leading cart, then helped him into the empty vehicle.

The warder in charge of the gang came up, and the position was explained to him. He nodded to his subordinate.

"All right; you take him back with you. Go along."

The warder, pleased at this quick ending of a laborious task, swung himself into the front of the cart, placing his gun along the seat; then, picking up the solitary rein, he called to the two tough ponies, and the cart swung off into the rutty road.

Once the warder turned his head to glance at the figure huddled into the vehicle. Steele was sitting with his head down and his hands pressed over it, a picture of inert woe.

The cart rumbled on, passing a thin belt of trees, then slid down a slight hollow, where a swampy stretch of ground divided it from the river.

They were out of sight of the kremlin, and the mist was very thick.

It was doubtful whether that warder ever knew what happened to him. Men in Adrian Steele's position have no time to stand on ceremony, and the blow that he gave to the thick-set figure on the front seat was meant to be a finishing one.

It caught the man under the ear, and, with a grunt, the warder toppled over sideways, falling under the seat.

The reins almost slipped from his nerveless fingers, but Steele, grabbing at them, tugged them, and swung the horses off the road. In another moment he had guided them into the swamp, and halted there, the tall reeds hiding the cart and horses.

Leaping from the vehicle, Steele unharnessed the ponies, then, when they were free, he lashed at them with the end of the bridle and they went off at a hand gallop over the mist-bound plain.

Finally, Steele tackled the warder, binding him hand and foot and slipping a gag into his mouth. Then stretched him out in the bottom of the vehicle, covering him with his heavy, sheepskin coat.

"Let me see," he said. "They won't find you haven't turned up at the Goubernski till they come back to-night, even then it may be an hour or so before they do make that discovery. They will probably search Tomsk first before they think

of coming back here. In any case I think I can reckon on a good twelve hours at the very least before the truth is revealed."

He glanced at the recumbent figure, and scratched his chin.

"Under ordinary circumstances," he said, "I might have helped myself to your uniform, but on the job I am engaged on, this kit will be better suited for my purpose. I'll leave you, my friend. Fortunately for you it is summer, and you won't take much harm."

He slipped out of the swamp, crossed the road, then took to the rough ground on the other side. His object now was to retrace his steps, and he had to make a wide detour to work his way round the lonely kremlin. Finally he found himself on the mud flats bordering the river, and at last came in sight of the long mudbank on which the paddle-steamer had grounded hard and fast.

The great prison barge had swung out into mid-stream, drawn by the tide, and had been anchored there.

Steele studied the position for a moment; then, splashing his way through the muddy water, he found a deep creek and slid noiselessly into the river, swimming out into midstream.

It was the mist that helped him. He was carried on under the flat stern of the prison barge, and a hanging rope gave him the opportunity he desired. A few moments later he had swarmed up the rope and clambered on to the low stern.

There was no one in that section of the barge, which was used as a kind of store, and was piled with boxes and ropes.

There was plenty of stir and bustle on the huge barge, for Steele could hear the murmur of voices and the tramping of men in the great, caged space below.

Watching his chance, the red-bearded man slid up the ladder and found himself in front of one section of the caged-off space. The iron grill was open, and Steele, with a rush, crossed the deck and slipped through the door. He was in the prisoners' quarters of the barge. From the sounds coming from the companionway, Steele judged that the prisoners were in the sleeping-quarters below.

The prison barge is about 150 feet long by 30 feet broad, and the large cage in which Steele found himself was set in the space amidships, and was about 80 feet by 24 feet. The roof was about 13 feet high, and was formed by a platform on which bales and other goods were stored. The sides were composed of heavy iron network, and the cage itself was divided into two compartments.

Steele, crossing the empty space, slid down the companionway to find himself in the sleeping-quarters below, where the packed inmates were having a meal.

The centre of this sleeping space had the same sloping wooden platforms as are found in the prisons. The walls were a light buff colour, and the decks were spotlessly clean.

No one paid much attention to Steele, for the inmates, sitting or reclining on the wooden platform, were munching steadily at their midday repast.

The sleeping-quarters, in half gloom thanks to the mist and tobacco smoke, made a safe hiding-place, and the red-bearded man pacing quietly down the wooden platform studied the features of the men as he went.

And so it came about that John Lawless, lying asprawl on his mattress, puffing a cigarette, felt a wet hand touch his shoulder, and, turning his head sharply, he looked up into a red-bearded, tanned face, the blue eyes of which were amazingly familiar.

Recognition came like a flash, and Lawless, stretching out his hand, gripped Steele's arm.

"By James, Steele!" he said, in a low whisper.

A quiet chuckle sounded, then Steele raised his fingers to his lips.

"Steady on, old man," he returned, "there are always four or five spies travelling in every bunch of prisoners. Where's the other man?"

Blake had swung round at Lawless's whisper, and he raised himself on his elbow now.

"This is my friend, Blake," said Lawless.

The two men exchanged nods, then Lawless removed his hand from Steele's sodden sleeve.

"You are wet through,"

"I want a change quickly," Steele returned. "Get me that, then we can talk."

Lawless's convict kit was under his mattress, and it did not take him long to

fish out fresh garments for Steele to don. The tall man changed swiftly, then Blake and Lawless made room for him, and he slipped between them, lying out at full length on the edge of the mattress.

It seemed as though there were something humorous in the position, for suddenly Steele began to laugh, a quiet, deep, chuckling sound that was obviously unforced.

"I dare say there's a joke hidden away here somewhere," said Lawless, "but I would like to be able to see it. Can't you share it?"

"It is all right, old chap," Steele returned. "I was just thinking about that—that greyhound badge. I suppose it was really that which brought you here. What happened to little Olga?"

"She's safe enough," said Lawless. "She's in America now, I should think."

Steele heaved a sigh of content.

"I am glad to hear that," he said. "I was rather afraid those two young people would get collared. Now, if you don't mind, I should like you to tell me just what has happened, and how you managed to get out here. I suppose they twigged my message at the 'Mercury'?"

"Not exactly," said Lawless. "It was my friend, Blake, here, who solved that little problem, and if it had not been for him no one would have got at the truth."

Lawless began to give Steele a full account of the incidents as they had happened, and the newspaper man listened attentively.

"We've got here rather earlier than we expected," Lawless commented. "For instead of running us to Nishni Novgorod, as we thought at first, they switched us on to the railway, and we came right through from Perm to Tieumen. We have had five days on the river, though, and, by James, I have had enough of this confounded barge."

"In fact, you are tired of being cuckoos, is that it?" Steele laughed.

"What do you mean, cuckoos?" Lawless asked.

The journalist grinned again.

"Oh, only just a term I had given to me," he said, "and it is a darned good one, for we are all going to be cuckoos presently. The summer is here, and we'll soon be ready for flight!"

He lighted a cigarette, puffed at it for a moment, then turned towards Blake.

"I am no end obliged to you, Mr. Blake," he remarked, "for what you have done, for the truth of the matter is, that I find now I bit off more than I could chew. I have been hanging on at Tomsk these two months, and I have got no forarder. One man isn't enough, and that's why, when I heard from Roubaikoff that you were coming out here, I was so glad."

"You heard we were coming?"

"Yes. I won't tell you how, but the message came through all right. In fact, I expected you to-day, but I didn't think I would have such luck as this mudbank affair. It has cleared my way considerably."

He gave them a brief account of what had happened in the fortress, and went on:

"I shall not be missed until to-morrow morning," he said, "and in any case the last place they would look for me would be on board this barge. I am inclined to think that it will be at least a day before

THE TAMING OF NEVILLE IBBETSON.

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-- NOW ON SALE --

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the paddle-steamer can get off this mud-bank, and you fellows will have to remain here until she does. If I can reckon on thirty-six hours, it is all I want."

"What are you after, anyhow?" Lawless asked.

Steele jerked his head towards one of the wide portholes, through which they had a faint vision of the gloomy kremlin.

"I want to get in there," he said. "There's someone there, and I mean to find out who it is. I have been beaten so far because I have been single-handed, and I could not find anyone to take the risk along with me, but I should think I have found the right men now, and I'm going to make the attempt at once."

"One minute," said Lawless quietly. "Our job was simply to locate you, and we've done so, but, if you are going to push us into a tighter corner than this, you must give us a chance to decide."

"I won't give you a snowball's chance," Steele said. "Hang it, man, you are the very fellows I have been waiting for—praying for!"

He ran his fingers through his damp, red crop.

"It wants nerve and courage to do what I am after," he said, "and these unfortunate prisoners in the Gouhernski are like so many rats!".

He turned to Lawless and put his hand on his sleeve.

"In any case, old chap, you won't back out, I know," he commented. "The reason I wanted to get to the kremlin at Tomsk lay in the fact that five months ago, while I was in Moscow, I received this!"

He slipped his hand under his garments and removed a thin piece of cord from his neck; attached to the cord was a dull badge, a greyhound in a circle!

"Look!" said Steele, turning the badge over.

Lawless peered at it for a moment, then his eyes widened, for scraped on the dull surface was the single word—"Hemsley!"

Steele leaned forward and looked into Lawless's eyes.

"You are one of the few men who know what this badge represents," he went on. "You can understand what I felt when it was slipped into my hand that day. There are so few of us left, and, of course, Hemsley was the man who suggested the idea."

"Who gave it you?"

"I am afraid I cannot tell even you that," Steele said. "But I know he is perfectly reliable. He dare not take any active part in this sort of thing himself, but in his way he does a great deal of good. As a matter of fact he didn't know who the owner of the badge was, but he was able to tell me that the owner was then a prisoner in the kremlin here."

Steele nodded his head towards the huge window of the cabin, through which they could see the misty vista of the river, and the great bulk of the kremlin looming behind it.

"Hemsley is in there," Steele went on. "I have had proofs that there is someone who is never allowed to leave his cell. They have stowed him away in the central tower, in a steel-lined chamber that was once used for storing ammunition."

"But why? What had he done?"

Steele's finely moulded lips lifted into a quiet smile.

"It wasn't what Lord Hemsley had done, but what he might do," he returned. "You know, of course, that he was a British Commissioner out here, supposed to be given special facilities for looking into the real conditions of life. I believe that he made a big discovery quite accidentally, and, knowing the sort of man they had to deal with, the Russian authorities realised that there were only two ways to handle him—murder him outright or get him out of the way!"

"Then that affair about the river was all a lie?" Blake put in.

"Naturally! They have a really dramatic touch these Muscovites," said Steele. "You can take it from me, Blake, that every detail of that story was worked out and could be proved to the hilt!"

He laughed again.

"If you wanted further proof, you might regard my particular effort as being the type of thing that can be done with money. You can take it from me that the British representative at Moscow is quite convinced that Adrian Steele lies buried in the little cemetery behind the Moravian Church. I rigged up that part of the affair myself."

He stretched his long, supple limbs, and chuckled.

"It was a rare game," he said. "I knew, of course, that the authorities had wind of part of my intention. It was a case of diamond cut diamond. They pretended not to recognise me, and I pretended not to know them. We have kept up that little affair all the way through, and, so far as they are concerned, I am still Ivan Sjemski, a particularly unruly convict, serving two years at the Goubernski Prison, for beating his wife, I believe."

Blake and Lawless laughed. There was something very captivating in this man's manner, and the bold, clear look of his eyes indicated that he was an adventurer born.

As Lawless and Steele sat together on the edge of the sloping platform bed, Blake decided they were a splendid pair to run in harness, and, mentally, the detective determined that he would see to it in the future that Adrian Steele was added to his very short list of personal friends and companions.

"What is the idea generally, Steele?" Lawless asked.

They were carrying the conversation on in English in low whispers, and the other inmates of the sleeping-quarters paid no attention to them.

"I am an opportunist," Steele declared. "To be quite frank with you, I had information that you were coming this way, although you have arrived here rather earlier than I expected."

"That was because they changed their plans," Blake said. "They switched us on to the Petrograd line, and we came through by train to Tieumen."

"They are getting much bolder in their handling of prisoners," Steele commented. "We were sent here by the old route, and that long journey from Perm by river was the most tedious of all."

Lawless drew out a cigarette-case and Steele accepted one gratefully.

"I haven't had a decent smoke for weeks," he remarked. "The regulations don't seem to be very strict here."

There were notices about that cabin warning the prisoners of dire penalties if they were found smoking, but it seemed to be followed more in the breach than the observance. At least two-thirds of the prisoners were smoking, and the haze of tobacco added to the mist, plunging the long cabin into half gloom.

"I am an opportunist," Steele repeated, "and I accept this grounding of the tug on that mudbank as a signal to us. I suppose the tug is the Amadrovitch?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Did you notice the skipper? Is he a short, thick-set man, who looks much more like a Manchurian than a Russian?"

"I have seen him," Lawless said, "and your description fits."

Steele nodded.

"Good!" he said. "If I can get into touch with Chervan, the skipper, we'll be all right. I dare say they will manage to get the steamer off this bank by to-morrow morning, then the barge will be towed down to Tomsk, and left there. This steamer is bound for Semipalatinsk, in the south, a good five hundred miles. If we can get there we ought to be able to follow the caravan route into Mongolia, or we could work our way down to Tashkend, and so into Persia."

"A darned long journey," said Lawless, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But a safe one," Steele observed drily. "We'll be out of touch with the Soviet. But, of course, we have an alternative—that is to try and get by rail to Irkutsk, and on down into Manchuria to Mukden, but I prefer to go by steamer, for, although it is slower, it is much safer."

He nodded to Blake.

"You see, we'll have to take Hemsley with us," he added, "and as soon as it's known he's gone there'll be a rare hubbub. The authorities wouldn't make very much fuss if three common or garden prisoners were to bolt, such as we are, but Hemsley is in quite a different category. They would watch every train, and we'd have no end of a job to get him through."

"I can appreciate that, Steele," Blake returned quietly. "My suggestion is that we leave everything until we have succeeded in getting Hemsley out of the kremlin. That's our first and biggest job, the rest will follow according to circumstances."

"You mean that I should get in touch with Chervan, and let him expect us?"

Blake nodded.

"I have no doubt that he could he trusted, hut it is not worth while," the detective ohserved. "You say you are an opportunist, Steele; well, let opportunity guide you!"

Steele thrust out his grimy hand.

"I have heard a lot about you, Blake," he said, "and I am darned glad to meet you now. I consider it a special act of Providence that you should come along here with my friend Lawless."

Another item of news came to Steele, and he turned to Blake again.

"I don't suppose you are aware that your friend, Rouhaikoff, has heen arrested?" he remarked.

"Roubaikoff arrested! When?"

"The report was rather vague, hut, from what I could gather, he was prohahly arrested a day or two after you left for Moscow. The main thing, however, is that he didn't betray you, so far as I could find out."

"I am sorry to hear about Rouhaikoff," Lawless said, "and I hope it isn't through our little affair that he got into trouhle."

Neither he nor Steele knew of the more recent happenings, hut they were to learn all about them in the near future.

Lawless told Steele the plot they had contrived, and the newspaper man nodded.

It was a sound idea to get away into Finland," he remarked. "The authorities there hate the Russians, and I should think that your substitutes in the villa at Wihorg will remain there until you return for them."

"I sincercly hope they do," was Blake's comment. "It would make it very awkward for us if the trick were discovered."

A bell hegan to toll, and a stir was made among the prisoners.

"We might as well go on deck for a spell," Lawless said. "You will he quite safe, Steele. There was a hatch of ten or fifteen men taken on higher up the river, and you will probahly be regarded as one of them."

They climbed the companionway into the caged-off space, and Steele's quiet assurance stood him in good stead there. In the prison garb he moved freely about among the other inmates, and Blake and Lawless were speedily assured that the newcomer did not attract attention.

Efforts were being made to get the steamer from the mudbank, and they watched the thick water being churned up from its stern to its grip, and finally a grey-bearded officer appeared and called to the inmates of the cage.

"We want volunteers, my children," he said. "You don't wish to he hung up here all night. Who will come along and help us to shift some of the cargo from the steamer and lighten its load, so that we may get on?"

Before Blake could check Steele, the tousle-headed man had taken a pace to the front and smiled hlandly at the bearded officer.

"I shall, for one, little father," he said. "I have had enough of this lazy life!"

"And I!"

"And I!"

"And I!"

There was somehing pathetic in the eager way in which these men volunteered for the heavy task of shifting the cargo, and among the thirty who were finally chosen were Lawless and Blake and Steele.

An armed warder appeared and opened the door of the cage, then the selected party trouped off along the deck, and were taken charge of hy the short, stocky skipper.

"It is Chervan," Steele said in an undertone to Lawless. "I had better keep out of his way, though I don't think there's much chance of his recognising me; hut you never know!"

Under the directions of the skipper, the tow-rope that attached the steamer to the barge was hauled in, until the bow of the great floating prison was close to the stern of the steamer, then a gangway of planks was fixed up, and the thirty grey-garbed men swarmed on to the steamer, and hegan to assist the crew in removing the deck cargo.

Dusk found them still engaged in the laborious task, under the lights of a couple of naptha flares.

The boom of a gun sounded hollowly from the mist, and Steele, who had seen to it that he and Lawless and Blake kept together, turned to his companions.

"They have closed the gates of the Kremlin," he said. "There will he no one allowed out or in until the morning. Our chance has come!"

They were removing a heavy stack of boxes, boxes that took three men to carry, and after another quiet whisper to

his companions, Steele slipped away, and was gone for about ten minutes. When he returned he was breathing heavily, and in the dusk his face was twisted into a smile of satisfaction.

"It is all right," he said, "I have a boat. Now let's play out a little comedy."

"What are you going to do?" Lawless asked.

Steele pointed to one of the huge cases, on which the name and address of the person to whom it was to be delivered was painted.

"Messrs. Paulos, of Semipadatinsk, are going to lose that case," he remarked, "and the unfortunate convicts handling it will perish in a desperate attempt to save it. Come along!"

He stooped and lifted one corner of the case, and Lawless and Blake did likewise; then, under the eye of the armed escort, they moved across the deck, and on to the planks.

The fret of the river made the barge sway to and fro, and the gangway of planks lashed together, although they formed a good foothold, were always on the sway.

Steele's pretence at missing his footing and the wild effort he made to balance himself again was a masterpiece of make-belief.

A shout went up from the armed sentry as he saw the figure sway.

"Steady—steady! Careful there!"

Splash!

Headlong into the river went the case, with the three grey-clad figures after it. A fountain of muddy water splashed up from the darkness, then a wild chorus of shouts went up.

The light from the naphtha flares only made the darkness between the steamer and the barge the more profound, and a couple of minutes elapsed before a light was swung nearer to the gap, and a group of the crew and convicts leaned out to peer into the river.

There was no sign of case or carriers, and a long minute passed, then the officer in charge of the prison barge came hurrying on to the plank gangway, and barked out a command.

A boat was put off with a couple of the steamer crew in it, and the search was continued, but the boat returned from out of the misty darkness with the report that no traces could be found.

The roll was called then, and to the names Givonoff and Noblesk there was no response!

"There was a third man. Who could he be?" Ghervan, the skipper, remarked, as he stood by the elbow of the Russian official.

The man closed his book with a snap.

"He must be one of the men who came on at the other village," the harassed official returned. "We shall probably hear about him in the morning."

As he turned away, the group of convicts in the cage struck up a song that had not been heard on the Obi for many years, a wailing, chanting lament in a minor key. There was no time for rhythm about the melody, and yet it possessed a melancholy beauty of its own, utterly unlike any other song on earth. It was the "Miloserdmaya," the charity song that used to be sung by every convict gang as they marched on their dreary way through town and village to Siberia in the days of exile.

At first the Russian official, white to the lips, tried to check that spontaneous outburst, but he failed to do so, and Ghervan, the Mongolian, shrugged his sturdy shoulders as he turned away.

"They have not forgotten, excellency," he said to the official. "I never expected to hear that song again. I thought it died when the revolution came. But it seems there are still exiles in Siberia!"

Again the song swelled out:

"Help, O, my brothers, help the unfortunates;
Lord God look down on us; lighten the road, the dark road to Siberia."

The wailing chant echoed and re-echoed across the lonely river, and came to the ears of three men who were creeping quietly through the rushes that bordered the mud flats.

Steele halted and turned his head riverwards for a moment to listen, then he caught Lawless by the arm.

"The charity song—eh? By jingo, I wonder what our friends at Moscow would say if they heard that?" he remarked in a grim tone. "They are wonderful people, the Russians, and there is a whole world of sarcasm in that song they are singing now, old chap."

They stumbled on through the rough tussock grass, gaining the higher ground, and finally they found themselves standing under the lee of a bank of earth with the great wall of the kremlin in front of them.

As they waited there the murmur of voices came to their ears, and they saw a light appear on the top of the wall.

Crouching, the three companions watched that wavering beam. It was a lantern held in the hand of a soldier, and behind him came two other figures. They walked along the top of the wall and halted at the corner where it turned to follow the line of the river.

"It is the 'Miloserdmaya,'" Lawless heard one man's voice declare. "I knew I was not mistaken, although it is years since I heard it before."

Another voice, a deeper, more authoritative one, spoke.

"Why does the officer in charge allow it?" it barked out. "It is just as well that none of the enemies of our Government should be here now to listen."

Lawless raised his head cautiously over the bank, and had a full view of the figure standing in the faint, yellow glow. A movement by his side made him turn his head. Steele was lying half-across the mudbank, watching the two figures intently, then the newspaper correspondent reached out and caught Lawless by the shoulder.

"The opportunity rises again," he said, in a quiet whisper. "That charity song is going to help us. The man in the centre there is the commandant of the kremlin, and the other on his left is his second in command."

Steele's fingers tightened to Lawless's arm.

"They have the keys of the central tower," he said. "Lawless, this is the chance of a lifetime! That song has brought them out to listen. We mustn't allow them to go back again!"

CHAPTER 7.

The Escape—Galtine Has Visitors—A Traitor.

FROM the wall to the mound of earth, behind which Blake and his companions were kneeling, was a distance of about twenty feet; not a long journey to make, but, under the circumstances, an extremely hazardous one, for the commandant and his lieutenant, with the armed sentry, standing as they were on the top of the broad wall, with the light shining on them, had a full view of the space below, and the slightest movement would have betrayed the three crouching figures.

Yet, if they were to get into that grim citadel, the wall was the first big obstacle that they would have to tackle, and, after a moment, Adrian Steele drew away from his companions.

"I'll work my way round the edge here," he said. "I believe that our job this morning was at this portion of the wall. If so, there ought to be a gap lower down. I'll try to locate it."

He slipped away, and Blake and Lawless watched his athletic figure as it moved off. They saw him drop on his hands and knees as he crept up the slight slope.

The beam from the lantern fell in a yellow patch along the ground below the wall, and Blake saw that Steele was working his way to the right, so that he would be just outside the range of that flickering beam.

Presently his figure appeared again flattened out now on the muddy earth. It worked its way forward inch by inch, foot by foot, spreadeagled on the mud. The two watchers hardly drew breath until that narrow gap had been covered, and they saw the tall fignre rise, ghostlike, against the wall.

"I should think that Steele has had to cross No Man's Land once or twice, during the war," Lawless said shortly. "That was as fine a bit of 'worming' as I ever witnessed."

The long figure moved off, and the darkness hid it.

A nerve-trying wait followed, then the click of a boot heel on the wall made Lawless raise his head cautiously above the level of the mound.

"Hang it," he said to Blake. "They are coming back!"

The commandant of the kremlin had evidently tired of trying to make out what was happening across the misty river; he had turned now, and was making his way back along the two-yard wide wall.

"I shall send someone across to the steamer to find out what has happened,

Paul," he called. "Wait here until I retnrn."

Blake's hand fell on Lawless's shoulder.

"I wonder if Steele heard that?" he whispered. "It gives him a ohance."

The detective's eyes were on the figure of the officer in the long, grey cloak that reached from neck to heels.

"He's a tall chap," said Blake. "Just about Steele's size."

"You can leave it to Steele," said Lawless. "If there's anything to be done, I think he'll do it!"

The officer came striding on down the wall and passed opposite Blake aud Lawless; then, a few yards further on, they saw him turn and commence to descend what was obviously a ladder on the inner side of the wall. His shoulders and head, covered with a round, furred cap, dipped slowly out of sight, and they heard his feet rasping on the ladder, then there was another sileuce.

From the mud flats behind them came the rustling of a faint wind, and now and again the call of a night bird winging its way across the lonely swamps.

There was a cold tang in the mist, and Blake, watching the figures under the light of the lantern, saw the sentry turn up his collar round his ears, while the other officer began to pace up and down the wall, beating on his chest.

"Paul, are you there?"

From the other side of the wall came a voice, the harsh voice of the commanding officer.

"Come here, I want you!"

Voice and accent were perfect, yet a quick thrill ran through Lawless, and he turned and leaned towards his eompanion.

"It's Steele!" he said. "By James, my faith in him was justified! Look out, old fellow; we may have to take a hand now."

The yonng officer came striding along the wall at a quick pace, then at the spot where the ladder was sitnated, he turned and began to descend. As soon as his head and shoulders had vanished, Blake gripped Lawless by the sleeve, and they crept along the high bank, and, taking a chance now, darted across to the wall, which at that point was about fourteen feet high.

The outer surface was of solid masonry, rough-edged, and Blake sent a low whisper to Lawless.

"We'll have to climb," he said. "Come along."

They were about six feet away from each other when they started that grim climb up the rough face of the wall.

Lawless was on the left, nearest the river, and he clawed his way steadily upward, moving at an angle. He was within a couple of feet from the top of the wall when from the other side of it came a choked cry, a half inarticulate call for help. Then something heavy thudded against the ladder, and there was the clanking of a sword on steel.

The sound of the struggle came to the ears of the sentry with the lantern, and Lawless heard the man whip round and come running down the broad parapet.

A frantic effort saw Lawless clamber up into another foothold.

The quick beat of the sentry's feet sounded, and he saw the light swaying as it drew near to him. In another moment the sentry had reached the spot immediately above Lawless, and, with a cry, the armed man came to a halt, lowering the lantern on the wall and swinging his rifle into position.

There was a click as the barrel was opened and closed, then the sentry, poising himself, raised the butt to his shoulder.

He was aiming down into the courtyard below, aud Lawless realised what was happening.

A struggle was going on down there. Adrian Steele had probably tackled tho second officer, and the man on the wall was watching his chance to fire.

It is in moments just as these that the real man of action reveals himself. Lawless, spread-eagled on that wall, seemed in a helpless position so far as rendering aid to his friend was concerned, but his quick brain gave him a sudden inspiration, and. with one mad effort, Lawless drew himself np, then his right hand shot over the edge of the wall, and he gripped the sentry by the ankle. As his fingers tightened on the stout boot, Lawless launched himself bodily from the wall, and, with a howl of fear, the sentry, plucked from his stand, crashed over with him, the rifle clattering on the wall, to topple over on the inside.

Lawless had expected that fall, so he rounded up his powerful body and took the crash with every muscle taut. He landed

on his shoulders, and rolled over in the mud, but a moment later he was on his feet again.

He heard Blake drop to the ground, and the man from Baker Street flashed past Lawless and threw himself on the figure of the sentry, who, half-dazed, was just in the act of rising. Blake's hand caught the man by the throat, choking the cry of alarm that came to his lips.

There was no time to stand on ceremony then; the slightest cry might have raised the guardians of the kremlin, and it would have been short shift for the three Britishers had they been discovered.

Blake hunched his fist and brought it round, hard and sharp, on the long, animal jaw of the Cossack. The man wilted under that well-placed punch, and his body went limply down into the mud.

Blake rose to his feet, and for a moment he and Lawless stood tense, listening.

There was no sound from the kremlin, but a moment later the scraping of a foot came to them from the ladder, and into the patch of light thrown by the lantern standing on the top of the wall, arose a round, furred cap, followed by a pair of shoulders, wearing a heavy cloak, but the face beneath the fur cap was not the narrow, bearded one of the Russian officer, but the haggard, lean countenance of Adrian Steele.

"Are you there, Blake?"

"Yes."

"What's happened?"

"All right, old chap; we've got the sentry."

"Bravo! Bring him along, round to the right here. There's a gap there. Come on quick!"

The voice was low, but perfectly clear, and Blake and Lawless, lifting the stunned sentry, carted him down the wall, and round a buttress, beyond which they discovered a "V" shaped gap, half-filled with new material. They scrambled through, then making their way amidst the building material, and guided by the beams of light, reached the ladder just as Steele, lifting the lantern, climbed down to meet them.

He extinguished the light, then, placing it near to the ladder, he reached out and caught Lawless by the arm.

"Come along, old chap," he said. "I am afraid that the lieutenant's coat will be rather a tight fit, but it can't be helped. He didn't run to your size, but I dare say it can be managed. Come on. Look alive!"

Under the wall to the left lay the crumpled-up figure of the lieutenant.

"I had to whack him over the head twice before he would quit," said Steele. "He was tough—darned sight tougher than the commandant. I got him first punch just as he reached the bottom of the ladder. He went to sleep—like a real decent person!"

The quiet humour in the voice indicated just how this man was enjoying the extraordinary adventure.

Lawless, stripping himself hurriedly of the grey clothes, donned the loose-fitting trousers, long boots, and great coat of the younger officer.

It was, as Steele had said, a somewhat tight fit, but in the darkness it would pass muster.

"Now, Blake, I think that your job will be the sentry. From the look I got of the fellow, I dare say you could pass for him, if they don't get too near to you!"

It was easy enough for Blake to strip and don the loose, shabby uniform of the Cossack. When the cartridge-belts were crossed over his shoulders, and he had gained possession of the rifle again, his well-knit figure, looming in the darkness, made a very passable copy of the man whose part he was going to play.

"We are going to be thorough," said Adrian Steele. "It may be some time before we get out of here, and we don't want anyone to discover what has happened to us. Can you manage your man, Blake, for I can manage mine, and I have no doubt Lawless can his?"

"What do you mean?"

Steele chuckled.

"I suggest that we take these men down to the river, put them in the boat, and send them off down the river on their own. It will be some time, I expect, before they waken up, and even when they do I don't suppose they will be able to attract attention before dawn. If we leave them here there is always the chance of them being discovered."

"Right you are, old chap!" Lawless agreed. "I'm ready!"

That these three men were in the pink of condition was revealed then, for one after another Blake and his companions lifted the motionless, grey-clad figures, and heading back for the gap, climbed through, and went on down the mud flats over the tussock grass until they reached the little creek in which the flat-bottomed skiff lay.

"We'll make sure that they don't waken and give the alarm too soon," Steele decided. "We have plenty of rope here, and it would be a pity to waste it!"

There was an artistic touch in the way in which Steele arranged that boatload. The commandant was placed in the stern, his hands and feet bound, a strip of his own undergarments forming a gag; the second lieutenant was propped up in the bow, while the private occupied the thwarts.

The commandant had given signs that he was returning to consciousness, for, as they pushed the boat off into the darkness, they saw the broad shoulders begin to struggle, and the head was turned for a moment, then the swift current caught the light, flat-bottomed skiff, and it went dancing off downstream.

"With a little bit of luck they will reach Tomsk at daybreak," said Steele. "Otherwise lot's hope that the mist has gone by then, or they will be carried on to goodness knows where."

They retraced their steps then, and found themselves in the Kremlin again. There was a jangle of keys as Steele thrust his hands into his pockets, then he turned to Blake.

"Now, old chap, if you are ready! Get that rifle and light the lantern. Your job is to go ahead."

He pointed through the darkness and gave Blake the route.

"Through that arched doorway first, then sharp to the right and down a few steps. You will find a sentry there. He'll challenge you, and you answer 'Commandant'; that's all. When we get through the doorway, the tower is just ahead of us, and you go straight on and round to the left."

So that Blake should be perfectly sure of his route, Steele repeated the instructions. He was leaving nothing to chance, for he knew that any suspicious uncertainty on the part of their guide would be instantly noticed.

Blake swung the rifle over his shoulder, picked up the lantern, then, at the slow, steady pace of the Cossack, he led the way across the yard, Steele pacing behind him, and Lawless bringing up the rear.

As they passed under the first archway, a door on the left opened, and a shaft of light streamed through, revealing the interior to be a guard-room. The man who had opened the door was a non-commissioned officer, and, as he caught sight of the party, he barked out a command.

"Attention!"

He saluted, and Steele, with admirable gravity, raised his two fingers to the rim of his fur cap, returning the salute.

Lawless had a brief vision of the room swarming with half-clad soldiers, then they passed on out of the beam of light, and a few moments later there came the challenge from the sentry below the flight of stairs.

"Commandant!"

Blake's reply brought a rattle as the sentry presented arms, and they went on through the doorway, across the narrow court, and gained the lonely central tower at last.

The sentry from the other door was watching them, and another little proof of Steele's quick intelligence was revealed then. Had he fumbled in the search for the right key, he might have betrayed them. There were at least a dozen keys of various types on the ring, and, holding them up to the light, the newspaper man made his choice.

He picked out the one which looked the cleanest, for obviously the commandant, living in the quarters as he did, would have used that key most.

His choice proved correct. The lock was turned, and Steele, stepping aside, nodded to Lawless.

"Come in, Paul," he said. "I want to speak to you."

Lawless passed in through the doorway, and Steele turned towards Blake.

"You will remain on duty here until I relieve you, you understand?"

"Yes, commandant."

Steele took the lantern from Blake's hands, swung round, closed his heels, standing to attention.

The steel-studded door closed behind the

other two, and Blake began to pace to and fro in front of it.

This adventure that he had been so suddenly swept into was so apart from his usual experiences that the keen-brained man found himself listening for the first sign from the dark structure of the tower.

To an ordinary individual this enterprise would have been the height of madness. That three lonely men could have attempted to force their way into that huge Kremlin and snatch a prisoner out of the hands of his jailers bordered on the incredible, but Blake knew the manner of men that Lawless and Steele were, and the grim smile that played about the corners of the detective's lips indicated his complete faith in them.

Once at the end of his beat, the sentry at the other doorway called him in a soft whisper.

"What are they doing, those jail-birds on the barge, brother?" the man whispered.

Blake was vastly glad then that he had a sound knowledge of Russian, and could answer the man in the quick dialect of the type he was supposed to represent.

"They have gone mad, I think," he returned; "but we could see nothing. The commandant is not satisfied, though. A thousand curses on them and their barge! Why don't they go on and leave us?"

He swung round and paced back toward the door, halting in front of it. He had no desire to carry on a running conversation with the other man, for there was always the chance of his betraying the trick.

So far as Blake could judge, the best part of half an hour elapsed before the thud of a bolt sounded, and the steel-studded door swung inward again.

The beams of light from the lantern in the hands of the tall, cloaked figure stabbed across the darkness, and Steele, crossing the threshold, turned towards Blake.

"Go back to the wall," he said. "I have got my night glasses now. I must see what is happening."

Blake took the lantern, and set off towards the doorway where the other sentry stood on guard. He noted that Steele allowed him to get some six or seven paces ahead before he followed, and out of the corner of his eye, Blake saw another figure emerge behind Steele, dressed in a similar grey cloak.

But it was not until they had passed through the archway and had crossed the courtyard towards the broken wall that a whisper from Steele sent a thrill through Blake.

"I've got him, old chap—Lord Hemsley is behind me. Go on, make for the gap."

They reached the gap, and Blake scrambled through it, then turned as Steele helped the other figure in the grey cloak to cross the broken surface.

It was a very cold, thin hand that caught at Blake's arm, and under the light of the lantern, Blake saw a drawn, hollow-eyed face, the eyes of which, however, were very bright.

Blake had often seen photographs of Lord Hemsley, but he failed to recognise the gaunt, haggard features then.

"We must wait for Lawless," Steele said, as he joined the other two. "Take the lantern along to the end of the wall, Blake, and leave it there. If anyone should come this way, they will see the light and think we are hanging about somewhere near. Lawless ought to join us in a moment. He's slipping out through the back of the tower, and I have given him his directions; he'll join us behind the east wall."

Blake hurried off, placed the lantern on the edge of the muddy earth-work above which the wall of the Kremlin arose facing the river, then returned and joined Steele and his lordship, and the three figures moved off through the darkness, Hemsley walking between the other two, supporting himself on their arms.

It was obvious that he had suffered a great deal, and was weak, but he made no complaint, and finally, when they came to a halt under the lee of the east wall of the Kremlin, a tall figure detached itself from the shadows and came towards them.

"All right, Lawless?"

"Yes."

Lawless slipped up to Blake's side, and their hands met and gripped for a moment in the darkness.

"It is best foot forward now, gentlemen," said Steele. "We have four or five hours to reckon on, and we must make the most of them. I want to get to Tomsk if I can. There's an inn just outside the town, close to the Goubernski Prison, where I know we shall be safe. The proprietor's name is Galtine, and he is reliable. Once we get

there we can wait until I get in touch with Chervan. Twenty-four hours ought to see us out of Tomsk safely on board the paddle-steamer."

And so through the misty darkness the long trudge across the lonely swamps began.

Twice during the journey, Steele had to call a halt and supply Hemsley with a few drops of brandy from a flask which the newspaper man had found in the pocket of the commandant's coat.

That last dreary mile that saw them trudging through the outskirts of Tomsk brought the released prisoner to an end of his strength, and, when they reached the low-roofed inn, Lawless and Blake were carrying the exhausted man.

Steele headed through a vile-smelling stable-yard and knocked on one of the side doors, a curious double rap. He had to repeat the signal twice, then a small window opened and a man's head, with a conical nightcap, was thrust out.

The fellow had a candle in his hand, and the flickering flame lit up the face, revealing a swarthy, beetle-browed countenance, with small, heady eyes.

"All right, Galtine, we are friends, friends of the old friends!"

Lawless, with his arm round Lord Hemsley to support him, stared at the enframed face for a moment, then turned to Blake, touching him on the shoulder.

"I don't like the look of that chap," he said. "What do you think?"

Blake, a quick judge of character, had felt similar suspicions as Lawless, but he shrugged his shoulders.

"We must leave it to Steele," he said. "He ought to know."

A moment later Galtine's head was withdrawn. Then presently the door was opened, and the inn-keeper bowed and scraped as the four muddy figures strode past him down the narrow, stone passage. The door was thudded to behind them, and the bolt shot; then Galtine led them into a low-ceilinged room, and, lighting a few candles, stared at his guests.

They certainly were by no means a prepossessing group, but it was their uniforms that seemed to hold Galtine's eyes.

"What has happened?" he asked. "Who are you, who speak of old friends, and yet wear that uniform?"

"The uniform is merely a disguise, Galtine," Steele said in Russian. "We want you to supply us with other clothes, ordinary civilian clothes, and shelter us for a few hours, a day at the most. You will be well paid, but you must keep silent!"

Galtine's eye travelled from face to face, and finally it alighted on the haggard countenance of Lord Hemsley. He had dropped into a creaking chair, and sat with his head bowed. He had lost his fur cap, and the fine-shaped head, with its iron-grey hair, seemed to hold Galtine's attention for a long moment.

Blake, whom nothing escaped, noted the sudden drawing in of the inn-keeper's thin lips, as the man turned away.

"All right, my friends," he said. "You are brothers, or you would not have known the password or me. You shall have shelter and clothes. Have no fear; you are safe while you are here."

A quarter of an hour later Blake and Lawless, in a shabbily-furnished room next to the one that Galtine had allotted to Steele and Hemsley, were seated on their rough cots, talking in quiet whispers.

Galtine had brought them clothes, and they were already changed, and the inn-keeper had also supplied them with a needed meal, but as Lawless lighted his pipe to enjoy a smoke, his face was full of grim suspicion.

"I don't like to say it to Steele, old chap," the tall man observed, "but it looks to me as though all our work has been in vain. If Galtine isn't a traitor I'll eat my hat!"

Lawless shrugged his shoulders.

"I am going to keep my eye on Mr. Galtine," he commented drily. "We have only twenty-four hours to go, and if I can help it, he'll never be far from my sight during that time!"

But Lawless was not to know that earlier that evening there had happened certain incidents which were fated to have a great influence on their movements.

There was no need for Lawless to make up his mind to watch Galtine, so that the wily rogue did not betray them.

Long before his guests had settled themselves in their rooms Galtine had decided to carry out that betrayal.

CHAPTER 8.

Tinker is Trapped—Yermak Takes Command—An Amazing Discovery.

THE Trans-Siberian railway, in the pre-war days, was known for its comfort, even although the long journey made the route a tedious one, but to-day, save for an occasional train bearing officials, the line has got into a slip-shod method, and there is no knowing when the destination will be reached.

It was just as well for Tinker, therefore, that he had a fair stock of money with him when he started from Petrograd, for he was fated to spend nearly five days, with many weary waits at stations, before he came to his journey's end.

So far as his personal comforts were concerned, he had nothing to complain about. The train was not uncomfortably full, and stretched out on a seat, Tinker dozed for the greater part of the time, only rousing himself to take a turn up and down the platform when the train halted for some obscure reason at a station.

It was at Perm that the first interesting incident occurred. They reached there late, and Tinker hurried into the buffet, where a big samovar was bubbling, and ordered tea.

While he was sipping the warm beverage, he heard an angry altercation outside, and, glancing round, he saw Alexis being hauled off across the platform by a couple of burly officials.

Alexis was protesting violently, but his captors paid very little heed to him, and a man standing beside Tinker turned and shrugged his shoulders.

"He might as well save his breath," the passenger said in French. "They are pig-headed people here and arrest one on the slightest excuse. That fellow will cool his heels all night in gaol before they even deign to listen to anything he has to say!"

Tinker got in conversation with this man, and discovered that he was a commercial traveller, representing a firm of Eastern merchants, who had been to Petrograd on business, and was now on his way back to Vladivostok.

They chatted for a while over business, and the man seemed quite satisfied with his tour.

"There is more money here than people think," he said. "I have done well enough, and I cannot complain."

When the journey was resumed, Tinker shifted his quarters and entered the carriage occupied by the commercial traveller, whom he found very comfortable with rugs and air-cushions.

Tinker was supplied with a couple of rugs, and he enjoyed a long sleep that night.

So far as he was concerned, Alexis' removal from the train seemed to Tinker to be a move in his favour, for the fear of discovery had always been at the back of his mind. Now, however, he felt no hesitation in showing the official papers that he had so adroitly possessed himself of, when, next morning, on the borders of Siberia, another searching examination was made of the train.

Here one or two unfortunate passengers were detained, but Tinker's papers were like an open sesame!

The train drew out again, and Tinker and his companion became interested in the view of the long, level plains which was a welcome change after the uplands of the Urals.

The journey, however, was monotonous, and it seemed to Tinker that the various railway stations were all of the same type, the same uniformed officials, and the same group of disinterested loungers.

On the night before they reached Tomsk an unusual delay took place. The train was held up at a station for the best part of three hours, and, after various enquiries were made, Tinker's friend, the commercial traveller, discovered the reason.

"There's a special train coming through, an official one, no doubt, and, of course, we've got to make way for his mightiness!"

Later on, the train, consisting of a powerful engine and a solitary couch, came drumming through the station in a cloud of dust, and went on along the rails, to vanish into the distance.

Half an hour later Tinker's train started, and it seemed to him as though that final stage of the journey was a maddening process of eternal stoppages. They halted at every station, and there seemed to be an unusual number of officials on the platforms.

And so, at long last, when about eleven o'clock in the morning the train drew into

the misty station at Tomsk, Tinker, taking possession of his battered valise, was glad to step out of the compartmeut and walk down the station in the stream of passengers.

The man before Tinker had been subjected to a couple of minutes' search, but, rather to the lad's amazement, his own sheaf of papers were returned to him almost instantly, and the man stood aside, allowing him to pass.

Tinker went on through the throng of officials, and he was not to be blamed that he failed to notice the signal from the man who had glanced at his documents—a mere lifting of the hand, but it was quite sufficient!

A squat figure in a long blue linen coat that had been lounging against the wall straightened itself up sharply, and a pair of bead-like eyes followed Tinker's figure as it came through the group of officials.

The journey had left its mark on Blake's assistant, but Yermak recognised him at once, and into the bagmsker's face there flashed a meaning grin.

When Tinker emerged from the station, Yermak had already slipped out and was seated on a springless cart, drawn by a couple of rough-coated ponies. On the cart were heaped up a few bales, and Tinker, going on across the muddy roadway, did not notice that the cart moved off after him.

The mist from the river hung heavily over the straggling town, and Tinker, feeling himself utterly at a loss, wandered on until he reached one of the main thoroughfares. Here a cafe, with the name of the proprietor in French, met his eye, and he turned into the place, crossing to a small table.

An attendant came forward, and Tinker ordered a meal in French, a language which he knew much better than Russian.

To his relief the man replied to him in the same tongue, and when the meal was brought, Tinker began to chat to the fellow.

There was not much doing in the cafe at that hour, and the waiter had plenty of time on his hands. He lounged against the table, answering Tinker's queries, and at the end of half an hour the young detective had gathered a fairly useful amount of information.

He had received directions how to find the Goubernski. His questions had also elicited the fact that a gang of prisoners had arrived there a week ago, and there was also another gang expected that day.

"'I doubt if they will get here to-day, monsieur," the man went on. "The report has come through that the fool of a captain has run his steamer on a mudbank up the river. They may not get here until to-morrow morning."

Tinker also arranged to hire a room from the cafe proprietor, and, at the end of the meal, he was led upstairs into an apartment, where he had a wash and changed into a rough, linen suit, with stout boots of local manufacture.

He had no desire to make any further use of Alexis's papers now, and he slipped them away into an inside pocket in his shirt. He had already decided on a story to tell if, by any chance, an inquiring policeman should halt him.

It appeared that a caravan of tea had reached the town on the previous day, and Tinker mentally decided that he would account for himself as being one of the party who had brought the caravan through.

It was early in the afternoon when Tinker emerged from his lodgings and went for a stroll through the town, finally reaching the Goubernski, a large, square, brick building, rather picturesquely situated on the summit of a hill outside the town, overlooking the river, and a wide panorama of green pasture and maize and barley fields. Adjoining the large prison was a smaller one, separated by a narrow roadway; this was the women's prison, and Tinker made a circuit of the place, studying it intently.

The main prison was a large, two-storied affair standing in a railed-off space in one corner of which was placed a sentry box, where an armed warder stood.

Lower down the hill was another two-storied, brick building, an orphanage, as Tinker discovered later. Then there came a few straggling houses, and below them a low-roofed inn, which brought a quick memory to him.

This, no doubt, was the inn owned by Galtine, the place where Alexis had had to report.

The gloomy aspect of the prison had had

a rather depressing effect on Tinker, and he began to realise that, although he had found it easy enough to get to Tomsk, it might be a very different proposition to enter that sentry-guarded building and get in touch with his master.

A couple of men in uniform came past him, and he saw them vanish into the door of the inn. They were wearing the same uniform as the armed sentry had worn, and Tinker decided that he would have to take a risk.

It was absolutely essential that he should gain some information concerning the prison, and he could only do that by getting into touch with someone connected with it. So, without realising it, Tinker walked blindly into a trap.

He strode into the inn, finding himself in a low-ceilinged chamber in which long, wooden benches and rough tables formed the only furniture.

Although it was summer there was a fire blazing on the open hearth, and the atmosphere could have been cut with a knife. There were nine or ten people in the room, some of them eating, while the others were sipping at coffee or tea and smoking the eternal cigarette.

Tinker managed to locate the two uniformed figures seated on the opposite side of the room, and he sidled across, seating himself on a form some two or three feet away.

A frowsy-looking girl came across to him, and he ordered coffee and cigarettes. When the cup was brought, he leaned back and began to listen to the conversation that was going on between the men he had followed.

He could only understand one or two snatches of words, but he discovered that the report which the waiter had made was correct, for presently one of the warders mentioned the prison barge.

"They will not be here until to-morrow morning, comrade," the other returned. "As for me, I would not care if they never came! There are too many men in the prison now."

Presently an inner door of the chamber opened and Tinker saw a swarthy, beetle-browed man appear. The individual was wearing a stained linen jacket, and, as he came down the room, one or two of the occupants greeted him, and Tinker caught the name Galtine.

The youngster studied the innkeeper steadily, and the impression that he got was not a very favourable one. There was something of the animal about Galtine's heavy jowl and cold, calculating eye.

The innkeeper stopped at the table near to Tinker, and chatted to the two warders for a minute or two.

Tinker thought he saw one of the sentries turn and glance at him, but it was only a momentary look, and might have been accidental.

The coffee was finished at last, and Tinker saw the warders rise to go. He followed suit, and, moving off through the smoke-laden chamber, reached the doorway and stepped into the passage.

It was rather dark, and as Tinker closed the door behind him he saw the burly figure of one of the warders blocking the outer door.

Tinker passed up the passage, and the man, hearing his footfalls, turned, then, as the lad reached him, the fellow stepped back, as though to allow Tinker to emerge. But, as he made to pass the man, the warder thrust out his hand suddenly, clutched the youth by the throat and forced him back against the wall.

The attack was so unexpected that Tinker was caught napping, and even as he tried to release himself from the powerful fingers, the second warder came leaping through the door, and a hood of some heavy material down over Tinker's head and shoulders. Then two powerful arms seized him, and next moment he was sprawling on the floor of the passage with his enemies pinning him down.

He began to struggle desperately then, but he had no chance, and, in less time than it takes to tell, his hands were thrust behind his back, and a pair of rusty, steel handcuffs were clapped over his wrists.

Half-suffocated and exhausted, Tinker was jerked to his feet, and he felt himself being hurried down the passage again, then up a flight of creaking stairs, to be flung violently forward.

He tripped over something, fell full length on the floor, and lay there, dazed, for a moment.

A high-pitched voice came to his ears, and he heard heavy footfalls, then another command sounded; hands were laid upon him, and he was jerked to his feet, forced

forward for a few paces, and pressed down into a chair.

The heavy hood was lifted from his head and shoulders, and Tinker found himself seated in front of a small table behind which stood a withered, wizened figure in a long linen coat.

The light from a narrow, barred window was shining full on the individual's face, and, as Tinker studied it for a moment, a faint chord of memory stirred; he remembered that lean visage, with its growth of straggling grey beard. It was the man he had seen on the front at Wiborg!

Behind Yermak was standing the stocky figure of the innkeeper, and at the door, lounging with his hands tucked in his belt, was one of the warders from the Goubernski.

"How do you do, Mr. Tinker?"

The thin voice spoke the words in English, and Tinker stared for a moment at the sardonic face.

Yermak made a gesture.

"Come," he said, "there is no good of your attempting to deceive me. I know who you are and what you are here for. You are clever, my friend—very clever. I have yet to discover how you managed to trick that young fool, Alexis, and gain possession of his papers, but I give you full credit for that. However, fortunately I left Petrograd on the day after you did. I travelled swiftly, with the result that I found Alexis in gaol at Perm, and I also heard that someone else was passing as him with his papers."

He lifted his thin shoulders in a shrug.

"You are clever!" he said. "You have got to Tomsk in a way that very few could have done. Fortunately, I was able to get here before you. Perhaps you may remember the special train passing you?"

The mere fact that this grotesque, stunted creature had sufficient authority to travel by special train, indicated to Tinker the manner of man he had to deal with. The young detective leaned back in his chair and eyed the shrewd, ugly face in front of him.

"You even knew about my friend Galtine here," Yermak went on. "How did you gain that information?" Then as Tinker did not reply a flash came into the beady eyes. "Quick, answer me!"

"You will get nothing out of me my friend," Tinker said slowly. "I admit you have collared me, worse luck, but I shall not tell you how or why I came here."

"Oh, I know why you came here," said Yermak. "That's not the point. You hope to get in touch with your friends, Blake and Lawless."

Despite himself, Tinker could not help his face revealing his chagrin. He had thought that that little arrangement of theirs at Wiborg had been a secret.

"You have walked into a lion's den," Yermak went on in a cold, metallic voice. "You English are bold, but you are fools. You will find it harder to leave Tomsk than to reach it!"

He turned away, nodding to the innkeeper.

"I shall not waste any more time with this young fool now," he said. "See to it that he's kept safe; I want to find out where his companions are. They may be at the Goubernski or at the Peresilni Prison."

He drew his warped figure erect, and nodded towards the handcuffed youth.

"Doubroff made a mistake when he treated your master lightly," Yermak commented, "but I am not such a headstrong fool as he was. Your master is clever, resourceful, and he doesn't lack courage; but he will not succeed in his enterprise. Doubroff found Yermak more than his match, and Sexton Blake will do the same."

It was the trace of vanity in Yermak's nature that made him reveal his association with Doubroff, and it gave Tinker food for thought after the lean bag-maker had taken his departure.

Galtine hustled Tinker roughly from the chair and threw him on a heap of rugs in the corner of the room, then bound his ankles tightly so that he could not move hand or foot.

"You will be safe now, my young spy," the inn-keeper muttered. "You may take it from me that your hours on earth are numbered. We don't permit interference from outsiders in Russia."

The man went off then, and Tinker heard the heavy key rasp in the lock. He was left to his own grim thoughts, and he watched the long shadows lengthen until at last dusk crept into the room.

Hour after hour passed, and Tinker

finally dropped into a troubled doze, but the cramped position of his limbs made his sleep a very broken one. When he was roused at last, he lay for a moment listening, then he heard the indistinct sound of footfalls close by.

He was unable to locate them at first, but finally decided that they were coming from a room on the other side of the chamber.

A murmur of voices sounded, and Tinker thought he heard the thin, harsh tones of the wizened man.

The desire to overhear what was going on came surging into Tinker's brain, and he rolled from the rugs, sprawling on to his face on the hard, wooden floor.

Then he began a long and painful struggle. Inch after inch, Tinker worked himself across the unhewn boards of the floor, now thrusting himself forward by his feet, then elbowing his way for an inch or two.

His numbed limbs were throbbing as he worked himself along, and once, when he came in contact with the table, he had to crouch almost double, and edge himself forward in the cramped, folded position that the schoolboy terms "cock-fighting." He was clammy with perspiration by the time he reached the opposite wall, and he leaned against it heavily; then, when he had recovered his breath, he listened again.

The footfalls had ceased, but, in a few moments, Tinker heard a door creak, then Yermak's voice came to him.

Moving along the wall, Tinker found a narrow crack in the rough boarding, through which a faint chink of light was pouring. Looking through the chink, Tinker had a restricted vision of the room; he saw a corner of the table and a man's leg. There was a lantern set on the table, and its beams fell across the floor; then presently someone moved into the patch of light, and Tinker recognised the innkeeper.

"Your excellency is sure that these two Englishmen are on the barge?"

"Yes," Yermak's metallic tones responded. "I have searched the register of the names of the prisoners, and have found the ones I am seeking."

"And what are your orders?" Galtine went on.

"To-morrow morning you will go to the Goubernski," Yermak said, "and you will give this note to the governor. He will deliver over into your custody the prisoners named Noblesk and Givonoff. You will take them to the railway-station in my private carriage. I have made arrangements to leave Tomsk an hour after dawn, and by that time you will have brought these prisoners to me, you understand?"

"Yes, your excellency."

"Another point," said Yermak, nodding to the innkeeper. "I am going out now, but I shall be back before dawn. I want you to send a messenger to the railway-station. Tell them there that I want the driver and fireman of my engine to come to me here. I'll give them their directions then."

"You mean that they are to come here, excellency, for your orders?"

"Yes; I don't permit my subordinates to know about my movements. There are too many spies in Tomsk, my good Galtine. Some of them play a double part even, as you do; but you are on the right side—our side."

Galtine's evil face widened into a grin.

"That is so, excellency," he muttered; "as Roubaikoff found out."

The heavy face lifted into a greasy chuckle.

"I shall expect to be paid for this, excellency," the innkeeper went on, rubbing his fat palms together. "Already, as you know, I have had a message from that other Englishman in the Goubernski; he thinks that I am on his side, and it was through that that I was able to find out what was happening in Petrograd with Roubaikoff and the others."

Tinker drew a quick breath through his set teeth, and his eyes hardened as they peered through the chink towards the thick-set innkeeper.

A spy is not by any means a pleasant individual, but, compared to a traitor, to a man who runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds, he is a much cleaner being.

There was little doubt about whom it was that Galtine was referring to. He must mean Adrian Steele, and Tinker knew now how it had come about that his master's cleverly-laid plans had gone wrong.

"By James, I would like to get even

with you, you greasy skunk!" the young detective muttered to himself.

He heard a chair scrape, then a moment later Yermak's stunted figure appeared in the patch of light and lifted the lantern.

"I am going now, Galtine," the bag-maker said; "but I shall return, probably about four o'clock, and by that time I shall expect the driver and his assistant to be here waiting for me in this room, you understand?"

"They shall be here, excellency," said Galtine.

"As for you," Yermak went on, "you must go down to the landing-stage and wait for the barge to arrive. I have sent word that they must get the steamer off to-night, and I think my command will be obeyed. They will reach Tomsk by dawn, and, as soon as the gangs move off for the Goubernski, you will follow them, then go to the governor of the prison and give him that message."

"And my reward, excellency? A little money—now!"

Yermak thrust his hands into the folds of his coat, and drew out a hulky pocket-book, from which he counted out a number of notes.

Tinker saw Galtine's eyes glint as his fingers closed greedily on the crinkling wad.

"Your excellency is worth working for," the man whined. "You pay—and pay quickly; that is more than can be said about—others!"

The lean face of Yermak lifted into a dry smile.

"I find that prompt pay means good service, Galtine," he returned, as he swung round on his heel.

The two men crossed the chamber, and the patch of light vanished.

Tinker began another hurried journey back across the room, for he was half afraid that Galtine might look into the chamber as he passed; but that fear was unfounded, for he heard the footfalls go on along the passage and downstairs.

Tinker reached the heap of rugs at last, and stretched himself out on it, his brain busy.

He knew that the conversation he had overheard was an important one, and it offered him many opportunities, if he could only take advantage of them; but, in his position, it seemed to him as though there was very little chance of his doing anything.

Galtine, waiting on the landing-stage, would no doubt intercept Blake and Lawless, and they would be taken to the private carriage and handed over to Yermak. What their fate might be then, Tinker dreaded to think.

Prone in the darkness, Tinker worked himself up into a feverish state as he cudgelled his brain to find some way of helping his two friends.

Another long hour passed, then Tinker heard a key scrape in the heavy lock of the door, and it was thrust open; then a tall man entered, carrying a lantern and a bowl of food.

He crossed to the heap of rugs, and set down the lantern, placing the bowl by its side.

"Eat," he said.

Tinker raised himself to a sitting position, and made a gesture indicating his handcuffed hands. The man sniggered, then, slipping his hand into his belt, he produced

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a bunch of keys and knelt down behind Tinker, unlocking one of the handcuffs, so that the prisoner could reach the bowl.

The man walked to the table, and seated himself on the edge of it, watching his charge as he ate.

Tinker's right hand had been freed from the manacles, and it was with this hand that he held the bowl to his lips.

The man on the table did not notice that the fingers of the youth's left hand were busy with the loosened manacle.

The handcuffs were of a primitive type, closing with a spring on to a bar.

Tinker, who had spent many hours in Baker Street studying the various types of handcuffs, was an expert, and his fingers, feeling the rusty catch now, discovered the secret of the simple mechanism.

The key had been withdrawn, and the spring was half home, so that when the catch was forced it would click into position.

Very carefully, Tinker slipped his hand into his pocket, and, after searching there for a moment, drew out a short stump of pencil, a mere fragment, not more than three-quarters of an inch long.

"Hurry!" the man at the table muttered. "I am not going to sit here all night watching you at your food!"

Tinker tilted the bowl, and took another mouthful of the vegetable soup; then, holding it across his knees to hide his movements, he took the piece of pencil and carefully wedged it in the centre of the bar, pressing the spring back until it was below the slot where the catch would enter.

Five minutes later he had emptied the bowl, and his custodian, striding across to him, made him put his hands behind his back again. Tinker felt the rough ring of steel close round his wrist, and heard the click as the catch was pressed home; then the man, stepping back, raised the lantern and, taking up the bowl, crossed to the door.

"It may be the last meal you'll get," he called. "Make the most of it!"

The door clanged to behind him, and the key was turned in the lock. Tinker listened until the footfalls died away on the stairs, then, sitting up swiftly, the young detective reached with his left hand towards the manacle on his right wrist.

He tugged for a moment, and the catch resisted his efforts, then, putting all his strength into a final effort, he gave one powerful wrench.

The stump of pencil broke, and the released catch flew out of the socket. Next moment Tinker's wrists were free, and he stretched his arms above his head, his grimy face aglow in the darkness.

It only took him a few moments to remove the ropes from his ankles, then, kicking off his boots, Tinker rose to his feet, and set to work to restore the circulation to his numbed limbs.

The handcuffs were still attached to his left wrist, and he had no means of removing them, but he slid the iron circles up on his forearm, and tucked the right handcuff through it, so that it was out of the way.

When his strength was restored, Tinker crossed to the door and examined it. It was a huge barrier, and the lock, although an old one, was obviously strong, and there was no possible chance of his forcing it, so, turning now, he crossed the chamber to the wall on the left.

He felt along the panels, in the hope that he might find a loose board, so that he might get into the room in which he had seen Yermak and Galtine, but the partition was stoutly made, and he worked his way to the end of it without finding a single gap. Then, as his hands reached the angle of the wall, they came in contact with a cupboard set in the solid masonry.

Tinker tugged at the door, and it gave to his pull; then, feeling his way cautiously, he stepped into the interior.

The cupboard was piled with rugs and clothes, and these Tinker removed until he had cleared a space, then, reaching to the left of the cupboard, he found what he was seeking, a thin panel that gave slightly to his touch. He felt along to the bottom of the panel, and his fingers closed round the edge of it. A quick wrench saw one of the boards torn from the nails, and, drawing the board aside, Tinker reached through the gap.

His fingers came in contact with a number of garments hanging on pegs, and a smile of satisfaction crossed his face. There was a cupboard in the opposite room, and the panel he had torn out communicated with it.

Another board had to be wrenched aside before Tinker could work his way through; then, a few minutes later, he found himself in the other room.

There was a window to his right, and he crossed to it, peering out into the darkness for a long moment. Then, presently, he saw a wavering light, and, as it came on through the misty darkness, it revealed itself to be a lamp on the side of a cart driven by a huddled figure.

The cart swayed on up the road, and, as the light flashed past the building, Tinker saw he was looking out on to the front of the inn.

The light vanished, and Blake's assistant, satisfied now, leaned against the window to think for a moment.

Yermak was going to return there in order to meet the engine-driver, and his assistant. It would not be wise for Tinker to be found in that chamber when the meeting took place.

Again he tried to think of some plan that he might make use of, but it was so hopeless that at last he gave it up, and, leaving the window, he went back to the cupboard, closing the door behind him, then returned to his own prison.

He was careful to replace the garments and rugs in the cupboard before he closed the door, then, crossing to his pallet in the corner, he stretched himself out again.

How long he lay there he never knew, but he was wakened at long last by the sound of voices whispering in the darkness. He knew that it was well after midnight, and he rose to his feet, creeping to the door to listen.

He heard heavy footfalls, the murmur of Galtine's voice, then, with a shock that made him clutch at the door, another voice sounded. It was speaking in Russian, fluently, but Tinker would have recognised the voice in any guise.

"The guv'nor!" he gasped, amazement holding him motionless for a moment.

The footfalls went on past his door, and he heard the creak of a lock at the far end of the passage. He listened, counting the various sounds. So far as he could make out, there were at least four or five individuals in that party.

After a long interval, he heard someone returning, and the heavy tread gave him a clue to the identity, an identity that was established a moment later by Galtine's voice.

"All right, Excellency, you shall be called early in the morning."

Tinker listened intently.

He heard Galtine's footfalls sound, and for a moment he thought the man was descending the stairs. Then it occurred to him there was no creak following the heavy sounds, and like a flash the youth realised what was happening.

Galtine was deceiving the men he had called to; he was pretending to descend the stairs, but the truth was that he had moved on to the passage, and was making sounds close to Tinker's door.

A few moments later proof that he was right came to Tinker, for he heard Galtine enter the chamber on the left.

Rising to his feet, Tinker sped noiselessly across his room, and, kneeling at the wall, felt for the chink in the partition. He was guided to it by a faint beam of light, and, peering through it, he saw Galtine seated at the table, the lantern in front of him, a sheet of paper spread out.

The innkeeper was writing swiftly, and was completely absorbed in his task.

Tinker noted that the man had seated himself so that he was facing the door, a wise precaution so far as Galtine was concerned, for he could see anyone coming in; but, in doing that, the man had presented his back to the cupboard, and into Tinker's mind a grim decision came.

With cat-like pace the young detective reached the cupboard in his room, opened it, and slipped noiselessly through the partition, then, forcing the other door open inch by inch, he found himself at last with Galtine's burly figure in front of him.

This man was an enemy, and a dangerous one.

It was seldom that Tinker attacked an unsuspecting person, but he had no hesitation in doing so now. The handcuffs were slipped down, and, with a soundless leap, Tinker reached the seated figure. His left fist, with the handcuffs tight round the knuckles, swung against Galtine's temple.

The stout man rolled over on to the table, then pitched full length on the floor.

Tinker's eyes travelled to the sheet of paper under the light. The message was written in French, and there was no need for Tinker to cudgel his brain as to who it was meant for:

"The English newspaper man is here, your excellency, with three others, and I think two of the others are the men who were on the barge. Something has happened, but, fortunately, I have been able to discover it. They think I am to be trusted, and so I am leaving them here. When your excellency returns, let him knock on the floor, and I will send up men to overpower these fools, but your excellency understands that I must not appear in the matter, for to play a double game one must keep out of the light!"

That diabolical letter sent a thrill of honest rage through Tinker's heart, and he looked down at the gasping, prostrate figure with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You have got what you deserve, you skunk," the lad told himself. "By Heaven, if I hadn't tumbled to you, you would have made a clean sweep."

He stepped across the burly figure and reached the door, listening intently for a moment. There was no sound, then Tinker, hurrying down the passage, knocked gently on the door of the end room.

Someone stirred inside, then he heard Blake's voice.

"Who is it?"

Tinker fumbled with the lock of the door, and swung it open, entering the room.

Blake, stretched out on the pallet bed, raised himself and stared for a moment at the grimy shape that showed under the feeble light of the candle.

"Tinker, by James!"

With a run the lad was across the room, and he caught his guv'nor by the hand.

"You are in a trap, guv'nor!" he said, "but with a bit of luck we'll get out of it. I've got a fine story to tell you!"

Lawless came across from his bed, and Tinker turned to him:

"Where are the others?" the lad asked.

"Humph! You seem to know all about it! Steele and Hemsley are across the passage."

"Fetch them along, quick!" said Tinker. "We'll want all our brains to work out this game, but I believe that if we do it the right way we can win through!"

CHAPTER 9.

A Bold Plan—Escaped—The End.

YERMAK, the bagmaker, came shuffling down the hill towards the inn.

It was getting on towards four o'clock in the morning, and Yermak was in a bad temper.

As is common with men who have to keep themselves on the alert day in and day out, Yermak was glad to get a moment when he could cast aside his burden and follow his own bent.

He was a gambler to the finger tips, as are so many of his countrymen, and on leaving the inn on the previous night, he had gone to the house of a man whom he knew, a mineowner, who had a big establishment in the better quarter of Tomsk.

They had played "vingt," which is a Russian card game of considerable skill. The stakes had been high, and that fat wad of Russian notes which Yermak carried with him, had received a severe pruning.

Yermak had lost more thousands of roubles than he cared to count, and, although he was aware that he could get fresh supplies from his masters, it had harrowed the wizened bagmaker's soul to pay up his losses and take his departure.

To console him slightly, his host had plied him with drink, strong vodka and gin.

Yermak's head was, however, stronger than these potent liquors; all the effect they had had on him was to sour his temper. He was, therefore, in a rather savage mood when he reached the door of the dark inn.

Galtine had given him a key and Yermak let himself in through the passage, then headed for the stairs. The place was in utter darkness, but Yermak knew his way well enough.

The inn was a fairly popular place, and there were other travellers staying there. Galtine's role as spy made it essential that he should run his inn in an open way, and Yermak had no desire to betray his subordinate.

He reached the stairs and tip-toed up them, making very little noise.

As he gained the top, he fancied he heard a rustling sound come from the passage, and his quick, ferret ears were pricked up at once. He made another pace, then suddenly and swiftly two large hands gripped him, one of them falling across his lips and tightening there in a vice-like way that muffled the cry which arose to the spy's throat.

Yermak was little, but he was tough, and he began to struggle fiercely. It was obvious to him, however, that the individual who had him in his grip was possessed of extraordinary strength, for in a slow, easy way, Yermak was lifted off his feet and held by one huge arm, helpless as though he were a baby.

His assailant walked down the passage, one hand still pressed over the Cossack's lips, and all Yermak's struggles and kicking were unavailing.

The door opened and Yermak was carried through into a chamber, then a match spluttered in the darkness, and a candle was lighted.

Yermak's bulging eyes grew accustomed to the light, and he saw now a ring of grim faces surrounding him as he was held in that firm grip.

The candle glinted on the cold barrel of a revolver, and the weapon was thrust forward until it was pressed against Yermak's chest.

"All right, Lawless, let him go!"

The tall aristocrat clapped his prisoner on the table, and Yermak, sitting there doubled up like a monkey, found himself looking into the steel-blue eyes of Sexton Blake!

Despite the grime and growth of beard on the lips and chin, Yermak recognised the

detective. The quick, brilliant eyes of the bagmaker travelled from face to face, and despite his iron nerve, Yermak found his jaw dropping in utter amazement.

Tinker was standing beside Blake, and on his right was Adrian Steele, while, seated on a chair between them was a gaunt, haggard figure, which, as Yermak's eyes studied it, made the bagmaker draw a breath of sheer dismay.

The stunted Cossack had not been in any way responsible for the vile trick which had been played on Lord Hemsley, but he knew of that trick well enough, and the sight of him there now, free among his friends, sent a thrill of fear through the wizened wretch.

His Government would have to pay, and pay heavily if this man got away and was able to tell his story.

The long, thin fingers of the bagmaker tightened on the edge of the table, then, cornered as he was, Yermak began to bluff.

"What does this mean?" he demanded harshly.

Adrian Steele smiled.

"I think I recognise you now," he commented. "I was wondering who it was that Tinker was referring to, but I have a rather good memory for faces, and I fancy I have seen you in London."

Yermak's monkey visage twitched.

"What does it matter where you have seen me?" he rapped back. "The question is what does this mean?"

He was beginning to recover his nerve now, and, with it, came his usual assurance.

"Galtine, I suppose, has played the traitor, eh?"

"Oh, no, he hasn't," Steele returned, "not so far as you are concerned! But you may take it from me that Galtine will never play traitor again!"

"You mean he is dead?"

"No; but I mean his true position as spy for your Government will be known very shortly. I'll see to that!"

Yermak's restless eyes travelled from face to face.

He saw now that Blake and his companions were wearing uniforms, mud-stained and begrimed. Steele, in the commandant's coat, made a grim figure in the candle-light, and the Cossack's eyes widened.

"So you have been to the kremlin?" he asked. "Someone will have to pay for that visit!"

"I don't doubt it in the least," Steele returned grimly. "But it will not be us!"

"I am not so sure about that," Yermak went on. "Russia is a big place, monsieur, and it is not so easy to get out of as to get into."

"Quite so," Steele answered. "To get out of Russia one requires a key, and you, my dear Yermak, are going to be that key!"

The cornered man's face twisted into a dry grin.

"You overrate my powers, Monsieur Steele," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Do you expect me to hide you all under the folds of my coat,"

"Oh no, we've a much better plan. We shall leave Siberia in comfort as your guests in that private train of yours!"

Yermak's eyes turned to Tinker, and the youngster smiled.

"You travelled very fast," Tinker said. "I remember how you passed our train. Perhaps you will be able to travel as fast again when we start,"

"It is impossible," Yermak broke out. "There are five of you, and, bold though you may be, you will never be able to get through. I could not take you all into the train, even if I wanted to!"

"We have arranged our plans, Yermak," Blake broke out, "and we are going to get you to help us."

He made a significant gesture with the revolver.

"Under pressure," he added, and the face of the bagmaker paled for a moment.

Yermak was not to know that Blake was bluffing, so far as the actual personal violence was concerned. Being accustomed to deal with men who hold life cheaply, Yermak thought that these men confronting him were as ruthless as himself. A life more or less to Yermak meant nothing, and he judged others by his own standard.

"Listen to me," said Blake. "Within the next half-hour or so the engine-driver and his assistant will be here to get their orders——"

"You know about—about that?" Yermak stammered.

"We know all about your movements," Blake said, "and that's how we have come to arrange our plans. They will come up to your room, and we will meet them there. After that we will go quietly up to the station, and make a start. Your orders to the driver and the fireman will be to head for Irkutsk. You will have a companion with you when you meet them, but he will not interfere in the conversation. Only you may take it from me that you will have to be careful, for it may be a dangerous companion, if you say too much!"

"To Irkutsk?"

"Yes; that is the shortest route out of Siberia," Blake returned, "and it is the route we want to travel. You are a free agent, and can go where you please. You will give the engine-driver instructions to head east!"

The bold plan revealed itself to Yermak in a flash, and again his furtive eyes flickered as they turned from face to face, but he saw nothing but grim resolve in those countenances, and the bagmaker realised that he was in a trap.

And so half an hour later, when the burly engine-driver and his assistant presented themselves in the lighted room in the front of the inn, Yermak, seated at the table, with a man in the garb of a Russian officer by his side, spoke his commands sharply.

The other man had the flap of his loose coat resting on the table, and the two stolid railway employees were not to be blamed that they did not notice that a round object was pressing through the folds of that garment against Yermak's lean back.

The pressure of a revolver muzzle against thin ribs makes for dispatch!

Yermak gave his orders in a harsh voice, and the engine-driver saluted.

"All right, comrade," he said. "We shall be ready within half an hour!"

The two men went off, then about ten minutes later a move from the inn was made. Yermak and his officer escort strode off up the lonely road, through the town, and reached the railway-station, passing through there into a siding where the special train stood.

A railway official came forward to the low wooden platform, lighted by a solitary lamp, and touched his cap as Yermak passed him.

"You expect others, Excellency?" the man said.

Yermak had already given details to the officials of what was going to happen, and he could not go back on his word now.

The man by his side was a menace that made him play his part out to the bitter end.

"There will be three prisoners from the Goubernski," Yermak said. "They will come here under escort. Bring them to me as soon as they arrive."

Yermak and Lawless, for it was the tall aristocrat who had taken charge of that part of the plan, went on across the platform and into the single carriage.

It was a saloon, divided into comfortable

apartments, and had once been used by a royal duke. The well-appointed coach made Lawless smile grimly, as he led the wizened captive through the corridor and into a section which was furnished with deep, roomy chairs and tables as a smoke-room.

Yermak seated himself in one of the chairs near to the long, paneless window, and Lawless dropped into place by the man's side.

Then began a long wait, for it was essential to the success of their plans that the others should not arrive until the first group of prisoners had been landed from the prison barge.

That hour which Lawless spent seated beside the ferret-eyed bagmaker was one of the longest he had ever experienced!

One or two figures had now gathered on the narrow side platform, and presently the driver of the engine came along and halted by the open window, looking into the coach.

"We are ready, Excellency!" the man said.

It seemed as though it was only a casual movement on Lawless's part that sent a fold of his coat over the arm of Yermak's chair, but it was a movement that did not escape the quick eyes of the bagmaker, and he knew what it meant.

"All right; I shall give you the signal!"

The man trudged off, then five minutes later through the half-gloom of the morning mists a line of moving figures appeared. They came up through the station-yard and on to the narrow platform; three drab figures led by another in a mud-stained Cossack uniform, the uniform of a sentry at the kremlin!

They reached the door of the carriage, and, at a sharp command from their escort, figure after figure vanished into the lighted interior.

The group of figures on the platform came closer to the coach, and watched the line as they moved down the interior towards the section in which Yermak and Lawless were seated.

Rumour had it that the wizened fellow, who was important enough to have a train of his own, was a very mighty personage, and these Tomsk officials were deeply interested in this incident which they could not understand!

All they knew was that these three prisoners had been brought especially from the Goubernski, for they had been warned that such an event would happen.

Yermak, on his feet now, moved towards the open window. Lawless leaned forward and put his hand on the thin shoulder; a touch, but it was more than sufficient.

Yermak's head and shoulders appeared out of the open window, and he waved towards the grimy figure of the driver leaning out from his coach. The man saluted in return, then there was a loud blast from the engine, and the group of officials stood back.

A signal jarred in the mist, then the powerful engine and long coach moved out from the siding, took the points below the station, and started off on its long run towards the Mongolian borders, bearing with it one wizened tiger, and five grim custodians.

A special train has many privileges on that Government-owned lined. It was over a thousand miles from Tomsk to Irkutsk, but the driver had been told to hurry, and there were long tracks of the journey on which he made amazing speed.

He may have wondered that it was always at little, out-of-the-way stations that the signal was given him to halt, and the officials on these lonely stations wondered why the exalted personage in the train pre-

ferred to have his meals brought to him, but Blake and his companions were racing against time, against the telegraph, for they knew that sooner or later that grim trick of theirs would be discovered.

It was only Yermak's absence that might hold up the truth for a time, and so every station that appeared in front of them became a menace, and the whole party breathed with relief as they flashed on without check or hindrance.

At Chita, three hundred miles beyond Irkutsk, they took a branch line for Harbin, and four hours later found themselves across the borders into Manchuria.

They stopped at Chorkat, arriving there late in the evening, and, knowing that they were safe then and out of reach of the Russian authorities, they had their last interview with Yermak.

"You may go back now," said Blake, in his grim way, "or go on, just as you please."

The eyes of the bagmaker narrowed into mere slits.

"There is no going back for me, monsieur," he said slowly. "A den of wolves would be safer! They will find out who it is that brought you through. There will be no corner in Russia where I may hide!"

"That's your affair!" Blake returned. "It is all part of the game!"

He looked at the bagmaker for a moment.

"I should not advise you to return to London, though," the detective replied. "There was something which happened in Jermyn Street which I think you can explain?"

"It is perfectly true, monsieur, that a traitor died there," said Yermak.

"Well, we call it murder in my country, and if I should find you there, you will be made to pay!"

They were standing on the wind-swept platform, and Yermak's ferret eyes studied Blake's face for a moment, then he shrugged his thin shoulders.

"You are quite right, monsieur," he said. "I think that if I ventured to come back to London, you would make me pay. I might even feel inclined to try and make you pay for this—some day!"

And with that he strode back to the train, and Blake, turning on his heel, went after his friends.

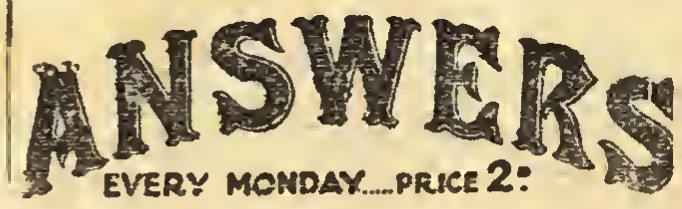
He found them in the waiting-room among a throng of broad-faced, sleepy-looking early travellers.

An uncomfortable wait followed, then at long last, a slow-moving Manchurian train was boarded and they started off for Mukden and home!

Lord Hemsley's return to London created a nine-day wonder, and the papers were filled with accounts of his imprisonment. The matter was taken up by the Government, but only a handful of individuals knew the real truth concerning that affair.

Adrian Steele's side of the matter was much more easily disposed of, for that wild will-o'-the-wisp character simply reappeared in the "Mercury" offices again, and, as he himself wrote for the Press, explained the matter by stating that reports of his death were greatly exaggerated!

But at a quiet supper held in Baker Street, Steele and Lawless and Tinker, with their host, discussed again the theory which Blake had propounded over that billiard-match, and Lawless, shrugging his shoulders, gave what was, perhaps, the truest verdict.



"Some men just can't help themselves being dragged into adventure," he remarked. "It is in their blood, anyhow. I didn't want to interfere when Olga and her brother asked for someone to help them. It was just my luck that I should know Russian, and be the only one to answer them in their language."

He nodded across to the red-headed, keen-looking newspaper man.

"But, after all, it has been worth while," Lawless went on, "for we have met a kindred spirit here in you, Adrian Steele, and I have a feeling in my bones that this adventure of ours won't be the last!"

A prophecy that was to be amply fulfilled in the near future!

. . . . . .

A month later came news from Olga; oil had been found, and the quiet contentment that ran through the letter told of the peace that had come to those two stragglers from an unhappy country.

THE END.

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